



THE KARMA CHAMELEONS

ARE BUDDHISM AND WESTERN
SCIENCE REALLY COMPATIBLE?

MANANANGGAL MADNESS PHILIPPINES VAMPIRE PANIC

PHANTOM GAS IRAN'S POISONED SCHOOLGIRLS SCARE

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WELSH COUNTRYSIDE
BECAME ONE FAMILY'S
HAUNTED NIGHTMARE

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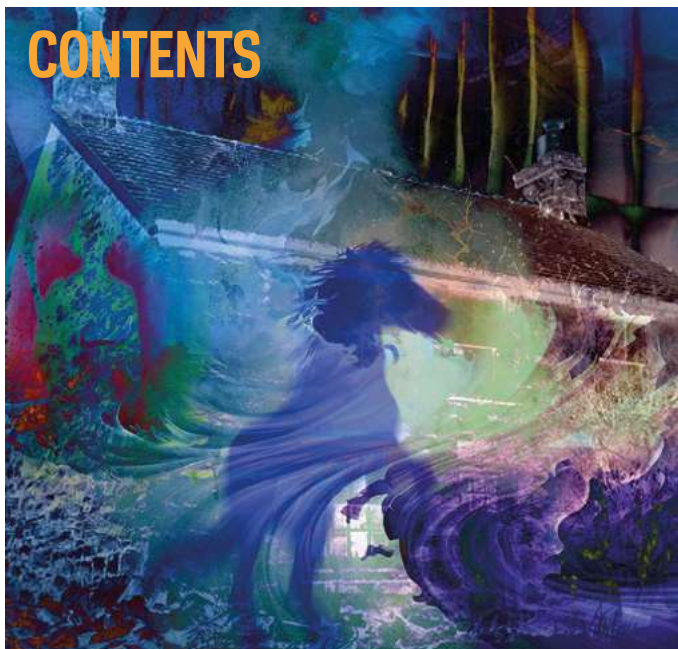
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CONTENTS



30 *The Witch Farm – what lies beneath the Heol Fanog case?*



6 *Iranian schoolgirl poison panic*



28 *US Navy vs Chinese balloons*



23 *Psychic sleuth success?*



67 *Waiter, there's a face in my beer*



22 *The toxic tragedy of the East Palestine train derailment*



FORTEAN TIMES 430

Why fortean?

Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

SEE PAGE
70

STRANGE DAYS

A digest of the worldwide weird, including: Philippines vampire panic, surprise resurrections, psychic sleuthing and much more...

- | | | | |
|----|------------------|----|--------------------|
| 12 | ARCHAEOLOGY | 18 | GHOSTWATCH |
| 14 | CLASSICAL CORNER | 22 | THE CONSPIRASPHERE |
| 16 | SCIENCE | 28 | THE UFO FILES |

FEATURES



ROB SHIRET

30 COVER STORY HEOL FANOG: WHAT LIES BENEATH?

The remote Welsh farmhouse of Heol Fanog might be considered the most haunted house in Britain thanks to 'The Witch House' podcast series. But could there be rational explanations for the terrifying phenomena there? **CIARÁN O'KEEFFE** takes a sceptical look.

40 SCIENCE VS BUDDHISM

Buddhism's dialogue with Western science is often seen as a positive working relationship between two very different ways of thinking about our place in the cosmos – but does this mean scientists cherry-picking the bits of Buddhist thought they like and ignoring the 'hocus pocus'? **IAN JAMES KIDD** argues that the two systems of thought might not be so compatible after all...

44 UNIDENTIFIED FASCIST OBJECTS

In an extract from his new book *Nazi UFOs: The Legends and Myths of Hitler's Flying Saucers in WW2*, **SD TUCKER** unearths the pseudo-historical artefacts of a persistent military myth and asks: Is the notion of Nazi spaceships really a flier?

SERIES

68 PECULIAR POSTCARDS

The Werds Brothers **JAN BONDESON**

FORUM

51 Englishmen in the afterlife **RICHARD GEORGE**

52 The Asbury Revival **TED HARRISON**

REGULARS

- | | | | | | |
|----|-----------|----|-------------|----|----------------|
| 02 | EDITORIAL | 63 | LETTERS | 71 | PHENOMENOMIX |
| 55 | REVIEWS | 70 | READER INFO | 72 | STRANGE DEATHS |

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EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS



ROB SHIRET

DREAMS IN THE WITCH FARM

A curious case that we reported on back in 1995 (see 'Paranormal Power Theft', FT80:19) has now become far better known due to its recent retelling in writer/presenter Danny Robins's eight-part BBC Radio 4 podcast, *The Witch Farm*. Building on the success of his *Uncanny* podcast, as well as a similarly in-depth exploration of *The Battersea Poltergeist* (FT404:24-36), *The Witch Farm* told the story of what happened to the Rich family – Bill, Liz (pictured above with Danny Robins) and their four children – when they moved into an old farmhouse in the Brecon Beacons in 1989 and were confronted with an extensive catalogue of strange, and sometimes terrifying, phenomena: phantom footsteps, electrical anomalies, apparitions, illnesses, possession states, oppressive presences and so on. In this issue, parapsychologist Dr Ciaran O'Keeffe, who acted as an expert advisor on the podcast, casts a sceptical eye over the case and argues that even the weirdest events at Heol Fanog can be explained without recourse to the supernatural: but can human psychology account for everything that went on over the six years the Rich family spent in the 'Witch Farm'? See what you think.

Also in this issue, Ted Harrison looks at the USA's most recent religious revival (p.52), SD Tucker finds a strain of Borgesian metafiction in the myth of Hitler's flying saucers (p44), and Ian James Kidd asks whether Buddhism and Western science are really as compatible as some proponents, on both sides, have argued (p.40). All this plus Chinese balloons, Mexican elves and social panics in Iran and the Philippines. We hope you enjoy the issue.

BOB'S BASEMENT BOOK BARGAINS

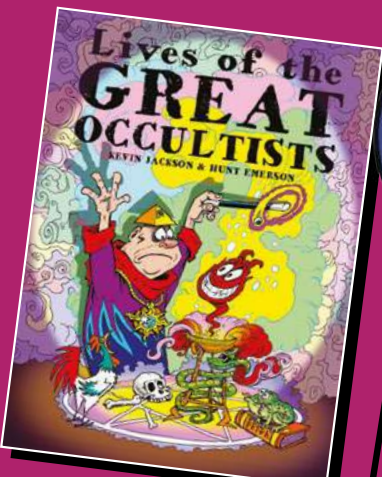
FT founder Bob Rickard writes: "I am trying to downsize my library, bringing out of storage books I need for current projects and freeing up shelving. Some books will be shipped off to the Archives for the Unexplained (www.afu.se/) in Sweden, many are duplicates or no longer of interest. I also have copies of various Fortean Tomes titles. If anyone would like to see a list of what has to go, email me at bobrickard@mail.com, with 'book clearance' in the subject field."

RIP JOE MCNALLY

Just as we were going to press we received sad news of the early and unexpected death of our old colleague Joe McNally. Joe was an FT staffer during our years at John Brown Publishing and served as the magazine's associate editor between 1996 and 1998. Possessed of a sharp wit and a thorough knowledge of forteana, Joe continued to contribute to FT into the 2000s. We'll bring you a full obituary in a future issue, but for now we offer our condolences to Joe's partner, family and friends.

ERRATA

FT426:25: Another in our ongoing series of *Ghostwatch* howlers. Steve Volk writes: "I was surprised to read in the article by Tim Whittard on the Fortean Film Festival in Gloucester that 'Graham Roos' was 'one of the producers of the BBC's legendary *Ghostwatch*'. Strange, as I don't remember him at all. With a bit of digging, it appears Graham Roos was presenter of the BBC's *Ghostwatch from Beaulieu Abbey* (1998) and not involved at all in the BBC Screen One drama (1992) written by me and produced by Ruth Baumgarten."



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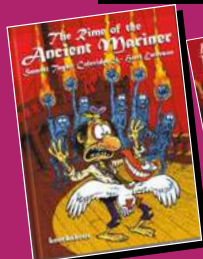
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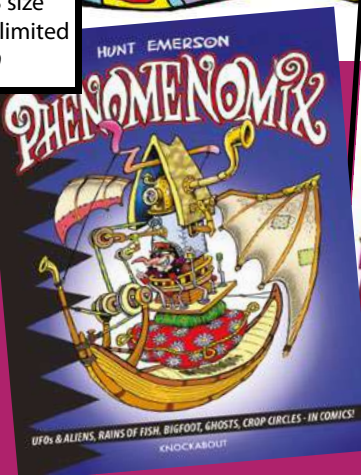
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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

MANANANGGAL MADNESS | Bat-winged vampire witches spread panic in the Philippines



ABOVE: Mr Albert Samson, on whose roof a *manananggal* was supposedly seen, and an image claimed to show the terrified young witnesses. BELOW: The folkloric creature.

On the evening of 7 February, two young girls in Barangay Dumlog, part of Cebu City in the Philippines, went to a neighbour's house to use the WiFi connection there; on the way home, they claim they were frightened by seeing a *manananggal* on the roof of another house, belonging to Albert Samson, 71, and fled crying to their home.

Manananggals (see FT64:11, 106:18, 342:18) are fearsome creatures of Philippine folklore, similar to the *penanggal* of Thailand; they are generally female and seen as a kind of witch or demon that can separate the upper and lower parts of their bodies. Once separated, the upper section sprouts bat-like wings, allowing it to fly into the night and hunt for food; it is essentially vampiric and is supposed to be particularly fond of attacking pregnant women and their

They are generally female and seen as a kind of witch or demon

unborn children. It is possible to destroy a *manananggal* by finding the lower part of its body and spreading it with salt or ash, or by exposing it to sunlight, and like vampires they have an aversion to garlic.

After the girls' sighting, rumours of the creature spread rapidly throughout the district leading to the police investigating to try and calm things down, issuing a statement from Samson saying that he'd not seen or heard anything on his house, just the girls crying and shouting, along with corroboration from another neighbour. If anything, their

involvement merely served to fan the panic, particularly when they asked members of the public to report sightings of "anything unusual". There were further reports of the entity in Barangay Dumlog on 9 February, and while police again appealed for calm, news that the girls who had made the original sighting were now undergoing counselling for stress did little to settle the city. There were further reports of the creature on 16 February and additional sightings in the neighbouring area of Turburan, where it was reported that a different entity, with a human body and a pig's head, had been seen as well.

Much of the panic about the *manananggal* has been spread by social media, with various

people posting videos of blurry "sightings" and showing groups of people out on the street hunting for the creature or its remaining body, despite repeated police interventions.

The Philippines has periodic *manananggal* panics, with a notable one affecting

turnout for the 1992 elections, when the Tondo district of Manila was rumoured to be stalked by one, with many local women allegedly suffering miscarriages

that were blamed on the *manananggal*. As one local said at the time: "In my village, no pregnant woman goes out after dark," *mb.com.ph*, 10 Feb; *cebudailynews.inquirer.net*, 10+13 Feb; *ancient-origins.net*, 14 Feb; *hitc.com*, 18 Feb 2023.





HERCULES UNBOUND

Life-size figure unearthed in a Roman sewer

PAGE 13



IMPROBABLE ANALYSIS

Crunching the data on ET and Sasquatch

PAGE 17



WAY BEYOND BLUEY

New oldest dog makes the record books

PAGE 25

NEVER MIND THE ALUX

The Mexican President shares a 'mystical' snap

Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador raised eyebrows on 25 February by posting a photo to his social media allegedly showing an *alux*, a Mexican woodland spirit. His Twitter post, which did not appear to be a joke, read: "I share two photos of our supervision of the Maya Train works: one, taken by an engineer three days ago, apparently of an *alux*; another, by Diego Prieto of a splendid pre-Hispanic sculpture in Ek Balam. Everything is mystical." The Maya Train works referred to is a railway being built on the Yucatan peninsula, which is a pet project of the President, intended to open the region for tourism. Pronounced "a-loo-shez", *aluxes* are classic trickster spirits not unlike British brownies or boggarts.

Local legend has it that if a landowner builds a small house for *aluxes*, they will look after the family's land for seven years and encourage the corn to grow. At the end of the seven years, the house needs to be sealed to keep the *aluxes* inside. Like brownies and boggarts, they can be helpful, but become vengeful and problematic if offended. In 2010, Elton John's stage collapsed during preparations for his concert at the sacred site of Chichén Itzá, and this was widely believed to have been due to the promoters skipping the tradition of asking the *aluxes* on the site for permission to hold the show on sacred ground. Rituals were duly performed, and the rest of the event went off without a hitch, as did those with Plácido Domingo and Sarah Brightman, for which proper permission was asked.

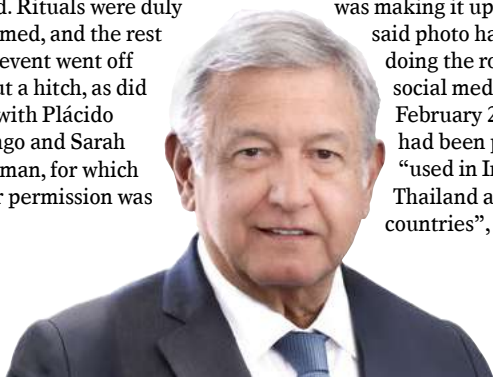


ABOVE: The photo posed by Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (below), which he said showed an *alux*, a sort of Mexican woodland spirit.

Many commenters dismissed the photo as just a fortuitous combination of tree branches and stars, or possibly an owl, but some felt it was an *alux* disturbed by the incursion of the railway into its territory. After Obrador posted the image there was concern that he, too, might have angered the *aluxes* by posting it without their permission. One commenter said: "You need to ask permission and offer tobacco, wine, water, and honey, following the ritual of our ancestors and the culture of our original peoples". Other commenters though suggested the engineer was making it up, as the said photo had been doing the rounds on social media since February 2021, and had been previously "used in Indonesia, Thailand and other countries", with its

actual origin being unclear.

While it is accepted that *aluxes* are part of the local Mayan spirit world, there is no direct evidence that pre-Columbian communities believed in them, apart from artworks that possibly represent something like an *alux*. It has been suggested that they resemble British spirits because they were adopted by the local culture after interactions with British pirates in the 17th century, although they could equally have been derived from the folklore of the Spanish colonisers, as similar entities are found across Europe. This may not have been necessary however, as spirits that behave in similar ways are found independently in folklore across the globe, for example the Orang Bunian of Malaysia. *yucatanmagazine.com*, 26 Feb; *yahoo.com*, 26 Feb; *independent.co.uk*, 27 Feb 2023.



EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

MERLIN ADDS CADBURY WORLD TO LIST OF UK ATTRACTIONS

<|> 2 Feb 2022.

Ryan to call for shorter showers and less driving

Irish Times, 4 April 2022.

BUYER BEWARE: ZOMBIE CARS WILL BITE

Irish Independent, 30 April 2022.

Let me live with the chicken that saved my life

Kent Online, 14 Jan 2023.

ROYAL NAVY ORDERS INVESTIGATION INTO NUCLEAR SUBMARINE 'REPAIRED WITH GLUE'

theguardian.com, 1 Feb 2023.



SIDELINES

BAFFLING BIRD

While going for a run in Burgess Hill, Sussex, David and Emma Jackson were surprised to see a kookaburra fly over their heads and land in a nearby tree. The bird, native to Australia, seemed completely at home in the Sussex countryside. They reported it to the Tilgate Nature Centre, which could not find anyone who had lost a kookaburra, but it is unlikely that the bird could have made it to the UK on its own. *West Sussex Gazette*, 18 May 2022.

HEADBANGER

Palmer Luckey, the inventor of the Oculus virtual reality headset, has come up with a new twist on the tech. His latest creation, named "NerveGear", is intended to create the ultimate immersive experience by killing the user if they die in a game. The headset has three explosive modules which, when prompted by a cue in the game, explode "instantly destroying the brain of the user". It was created to commemorate the anime *Sword Art Online* and is, Luckey says, currently "just a piece of office art" but is intended to be thought-provoking about game design. *independent.co.uk*, 10 Nov 2022.

OUT OF THE BAG

Security officers at JFK International Airport in New York were surprised when an X-ray of a passenger's bag showed a live cat in it. The passenger, who was en route from New York to Florida, was also surprised to find the animal in his luggage as it had crept into the bag without his knowledge while he was packing. The ginger cat, apparently named "Smells", was released and airport security spokesperson Lisa Farbstein said, "It's rare to discover a live animal in a checked bag, but on the bright side the cat's out of the bag and safely back home." *9news.com.au*, 23 Nov 2022.



MARTIN ROSS

POISON GAS OR PANIC?

Are events in Iran a case of contagion?



For more than three months, Iran has been in the grip of an apparent wave of schoolgirl poisonings. This started on 30 November, when 18 students at the Nour Technical School in the holy city of Qom fell ill with respiratory problems and had to be taken to hospital. Since then, at least 10 other schools in Qom and the surrounding province have experienced alleged poisonings. Further incidents have been reported from the capital Tehran, Ardebi in the northwest, and Bourjed in the west of Iran, where 194 girls have been reported as being poisoned at four schools.

In the Iranian parliament, one MP speaking in a session on the incidents said that more than 15 cities had reported poisonings, although he did not name them. At least 700 students have been affected, and some schools have experienced more than one alleged attack. Victims have suffered respiratory problems, headaches, nausea, heart palpitations, dizziness and fatigue, and many have needed hospitalisation. Some parents have said their children have been ill for weeks following a poisoning incident, and one video shown on Iranian news media featured a mother sitting beside a teenage girl lying dazed

At least 10 other schools in Qom have experienced alleged poisonings

on a bed saying, "My child is in a hospital bed and her limbs are weak. I pinch her but she doesn't feel anything. Please don't send your children to school." Victims have reported smelling tangerines, rotten fish, chlorine or cleaning agents before they fell ill, and there have been rumours that "strange objects" were seen being thrown into school grounds before incidents.

Investigations have not produced any credible suspects, nor has it been possible to clearly identify the poison used. Younes Panahi, a deputy health minister, said the girls had been poisoned by chemicals that "are not military grade and are publicly available"; but this seems to have been a deduction based on the reported smells more than the result of any poisonous substance being discovered. Health Ministry spokesman Pedram Pakaeien said the poisoning didn't come from a virus or a microbe, while Alireza Monadi Sefidan, head

ABOVE: One of the hospitalised schoolgirls is interviewed on Iranian TV. FACING PAGE: Female students remove their hijabs in a school protest.

of the parliament's education committee, said that nitrogen gas was detected in the poison used at some of the schools. This does not entirely move things forward, though, as air itself is 70 per cent nitrogen. A high-level investigative committee has been formed to track down the poisoners and there has been widespread condemnation of the attacks from all sectors of Iranian society, with the government vowing to find the culprits. The continuing incidents are also leading to parents keeping children at home, and schools in affected areas closing to prevent further attacks. The inability of the Iranian authorities to prevent the poisonings is not only causing widespread anger in the country, but also leading to international concern, with the US State Department calling on Iran to investigate the poisonings and find those responsible.

As for why girls' schools might be targeted with poison, Panahi said, "It was found that some people wanted all schools, especially girls' schools, to be closed," although he did not specify exactly which



people or how he knew this. Jamileh Kadivar, a prominent reformist, raised the possibility of “domestic extremists” who “aim to replace the Islamic Republic with a caliphate or a Taliban-type Islamic emirate” being responsible. While girls’ education has never previously been threatened in Iran, even during the turmoil of the revolution, the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan view educating girls as contrary to Islam and have forced all girls’ schools to close. There is also speculation that the alleged attacks are “payback” for the prominent role school students have played in unrest over the last year relating to the mandatory wearing of the hijab – during protests social media frequently featured videos showing schoolgirls ripping off their headscarves and chanting anti-establishment slogans.

For regular FT readers, though, much of this will look familiar. The events bear all the hallmarks of a contagious conversion disorder outbreak, also known as a social panic, mass hysteria or mass psychogenic illness. These frequently centre on schools; predominantly, although not exclusively, girls’ schools (indeed, there is a report that one boys’ school was affected in Iran) and are most frequent when there are unresolved community stresses. In Iran, the stresses come from

the continuing hijab protests, along with news about the Taliban’s actions in Afghanistan. There is clearly an underlying tension between reforming impulses and ultra-traditional views, and it is no surprise that the first poisoning report came from Qom, the very centre of traditional Islam in Iran and home to many important shrines. When social stresses find an outlet through a conversion disorder, the symptoms exhibited by those involved closely mirror those of the felled Iranian girls – headaches, lethargy, nausea, dizziness and respiratory problems – and experiencers frequently report an odd smell before succumbing. Once an outbreak is underway, and people in other locations hear about an incident, a strong smell or other trigger can make people recall previous reports and fear that they too are being poisoned, leading to them exhibiting symptoms and setting off a cascade of psychologically generated illness among their peer group. Official responses, with emergency vehicles, prominent media reports, accusations and so on only go to build an atmosphere of fear and expectation that sets the scene for further outbreaks.

What has been going on in Iran mirrors this exactly: it is a textbook example of a contagious conversion disorder and is likely

to continue as long as there is uproar and emotive media reports.

In Robert Bartholomew and Bob Rickard’s definitive book on the subject, *Mass Hysteria in Schools* (2014) the authors recommend that when a student shows signs of the disorder teachers should quietly and quickly separate them from other students and take them somewhere to recover, and that media should not speculate wildly about poison, disease or other external causes. If they treat the whole phenomenon as firmly psychological, this reduces the opportunity for social contagion and allows it to fade away. Sometimes, as with the UK’s 2021 nightclub needle-spiking panic (FT413:4-5), events break the contagion cycle; in that case the Christmas holiday helped damp the contagion down. In other cases, such as the current fentanyl contact overdose panic among US police and, increasingly probably, Havana Syndrome (FT359:22, 360:14, 363:4, 370:26-27, 382:10-11, 389:26-27, 401:9, 407:21, 411:26, 414:8, 417:28, 426:14) among the intelligence community, the problem becomes endemic and long term, with no obvious resolution in sight. *apnews.com*, 28 Feb; *BBC News*, 1 Mar; *aljazeera.com*, 1 Mar; *theguardian.com*, 27 Feb+2 Mar 2023.

SIDELINES

HIROSHIMA PUZZLER

Police in Hiroshima, Japan, are trying to find a man who threw a paper plane into the cenotaph at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, which contains the names of everyone known to have been killed there by the atomic bomb. The plane was taped shut and contained the message “Great Hiroshima Earthquake 10.28 5:18” although there is no record of such an earthquake and if it was meant as a prediction, it was inaccurate. It also contained further text reading “165 countries as of [illegible date]” and “14 including Hiroshima [illegible] Nagasaki”. Police expressed doubts that the dart throwing was a crime, but felt it might fall under a law about disrespecting cemeteries and places of worship. *boingboing.net*, 9 Nov 2022.

KKKFC?

KFC customers in Germany were sent a message saying “It’s memorial day for Kristallnacht! Treat yourself with more tender cheese on your crispy chicken. Now at KFCheese!” Kristallnacht is the date in 1938 when Nazis attacked synagogues and Jewish businesses and is a day of solemn memorial in Germany. KFC blamed an automatic system that sends promotional messages based on significant calendar dates and apologised profusely, saying, “We understand and respect the gravity and history of this day, and remain committed to equity, inclusion and belonging for all.” *BBC News*, 10 Nov 2022.

BACKYARD UNICORN

A girl named only as Madeline wrote to Los Angeles Animal Control saying: “Dear LA County, I would like your approval if I can have a unicorn in my backyard if I can find one.” They wrote back, sending her a printed licence certificate, a heart-shaped, rose-coloured metal tag with “Permanent Unicorn License” on it, and a cute toy unicorn. They also specified that any unicorn she finds must be provided with ample exposure to sunlight, moonbeams and rainbows and have its horn polished at least once a month with a soft cloth. They commended her for her “sense of responsible pet ownership to seek permission in advance”. *yahoo.com/news*, 8 Dec 2022.





SIDELINES...

CRACKED

The US Air Force grounded 116 of its C-130 Hercules transport aircraft after discovering that inscriptions scratched on their propellers to document inspections for cracks actually caused cracks. "The process, which involved an electric arc pen to incise digits into the surface of the metal likely contributed to cracks that are being found on the C-130Hs," said Major Beau Downey, an Air Force spokesperson. *avweb.com*, 9 Nov 2022.

ACTUAL GUARDIAN ANGEL

Catholic priest Father John Bok was on his way to celebrate a Mass dedicated to guardian angels when he narrowly cheated death in a car accident, but remained unaware of it until police informed him hours later. The driver of an oncoming SUV had lost control and it had swerved towards Bok's car, only to hit a road sign and become airborne, flying over it. Bok is blind in his left eye and wears hearing aids. "Out of the corner of my eye I sensed something went by, but I just thought it was a bird or something like that," he said, adding that he was sure God had a hand in his survival. *mirror.co.uk*, 11 Nov 2022.

DUMB RAIDER

In Mus, Turkey, a pair of tomb-raiding thieves fell out after one accused the other of trying to keep the loot and called the police to complain, resulting in both the miscreants being arrested. *Metro*, 7 Oct 2022.

OPTIMIST

Two rare white lion cubs have been attracting a lot of attention at Accra Zoo in Ghana, not all of it wanted. A middle-aged man attempted to steal them by climbing the 10ft (3m) fence around their enclosure, but was immediately killed and eaten by one of the adult lions. *Sun* 30 Aug 2022.



MARTIN ROSS

BACK FROM THE DEAD | An earthquake miracle and a trip to musical Hell



LEFT: Pastor Gerald Johnson, whose unusual near-death experience took him to Hell, where Rihanna (below) provided the musical soundtrack.

Gerald Johnson, a priest from Michigan, made a TikTok video to publicise his experiences following a heart attack during which he says he died before being revived by medics. In the brief period that he was dead, he had an unusual near-death experience (NDE) in which he visited Hell, seeing things that shocked and horrified him. "I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy," Johnson says. "I don't care what he did to me. No one deserves that." He entered Hell through "the very centre of the Earth" and says that "the things I saw there are indescribable," but still goes on to describe them. He claims to have seen a man walking on all fours like a dog, burning from head to toe: "His eyes were bulging and worse than that: He was wearing chains on his neck. He was like a hellhound. There was a demon holding the chains." He also says he heard demons singing Rihanna's "Umbrella" and Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy" to torture people. Johnson feels the experience made him a better man, realising that he should forgive people who had wronged him instead of wishing for their punishment. *popularmechanics.com*, 30 Jan 2023.

• In Thailand, on 16 January, Raklae Kaewkrumork, 56, developed breathing difficulties, despite always having been in good health. Taken to the Mukdahan Hospital, he was diagnosed with coronary artery disease and his relatives were told that he was likely to die in the near future, and that they should prepare for the worst. He was fitted with a respirator and sent home to spend his final days with his family. Shortly afterwards, when Kaewkrumork had returned home and the respirator was removed, he was found to be unresponsive and to have no pulse, so his family began to prepare him for his funeral. Six hours later, though, he sat up and started breathing normally; and although he had a reputation for being a man of few words, he talked constantly for a day and a night, recounting his experiences while dead, which involved the slaughter of pigs, chickens and buffaloes in another village. While his family were delighted

by his surprising return, his neighbours queued outside the house to see if he had seen anything on the other side that might help them with their lottery numbers. *aseanow.com*, 20 Jan 2023.

• Shortly after three-year-old Camila Paralta was taken to hospital in San Luis Potosi, Mexico, suffering from a high fever and severe vomiting, she was pronounced dead from dehydration, despite being given intravenous fluids on arrival and although no ECG was carried out to confirm this. A day later, during her funeral service, Camila's mother Mary noticed that her daughter was breathing inside the coffin and found she still had a pulse. An ambulance was called, which rushed the girl to hospital. She was given CPR, but was pronounced dead again shortly after her arrival, this time from swelling of the brain, and unfortunately remained so this time. *independent.co.uk*, 2 Sept 2022.

• A 66-year-old woman, who has not been named, admitted to the Glen Oaks Alzheimer's Special Care Center in Urbandale, Iowa, at the end of December with "senile degeneration of the brain", was reported to have died at 6am on 3 January by a nurse at the hospice. She had found that the woman's "mouth was open, her eyes were fixed, and there were no breath sounds" and had been unable to locate any pulse with a stethoscope. The nurse also put her hand on the woman's abdomen and "noted no movement". She informed the duty manager, who notified the



KEVIN MAZUR / GETTY IMAGES FOR ROC NATION



family, and then called a funeral home. An hour and 40 minutes later, the funeral director arrived, put the woman “inside a cloth bag and zipped it shut” then took her to the Ankeny Funeral Home and Crematory. There, shortly before 8.30am, “funeral home staff unzipped the bag and observed [the woman’s] chest was moving, and she was gasping for air”. They called emergency services who found that while the woman had a pulse, she had no eye movement or verbal, vocal or motor response. After taking her to the emergency room she was returned to the hospice, where she died with her family at her side two days later. A state investigation found that the Care Center had failed to ensure the woman received “dignified treatment and care at end of life” and fined them \$10,000, the maximum allowed under Iowa law. *nbcnews.com*, 3 Feb 2023.

- A month later, a similar incident took place in New York. There, an 82-year-old woman, who has not been named, was declared dead at Water’s Edge Rehab and Nursing Centre at Port Jefferson in Long Island at 11.15am on 4 February. She was taken to the OB Davis Funeral Homes, arriving at 1.30pm, but was found still to be alive at 2.09pm and taken to hospital. What her ultimate fate was remains unclear; the funeral home said, “Out of respect for the privacy and confidentiality



A body washed up on a beach was identified by family members

of the families we are honoured to serve, we are not in a position to comment further on this matter,” while the state health department is carrying out an investigation of the care home, which had just won a Best Nursing Homes for 2022-2023 award. *irishmirror.ie*, 7 Feb 2023.

- Police searching for 36-year-old Deepak Balakrishnan Kandi, who went missing from Meppayur, in Kerala, India, last June, believed they had found him when a body washed up on a nearby beach was identified as his by family members, after which they held a funeral and cremated the remains.

ABOVE: Chatty man Raklae Kaewkrunk, back from the dead.
LEFT: Deepak Balakrishnan was found alive and well in a hotel, blissfully ignorant of his supposed death.

However, a DNA test showed that the corpse was in fact that of a man named Irshad from Panthirkkara, also in Kerala, prompting police to resume the search for Deepak. He was discovered by officers eight months later in a hotel in the town of Margao in Goa, during a routine sweep, unaware that he was supposed to be dead. *mirror.co.uk*, 3 Feb 2023.

- Following the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria there have been numerous stories of people miraculously rescued after spending hours trapped beneath the rubble of collapsed buildings, but one report described what sounds like a genuine, Lazarus-like miracle. An unresponsive Ahmed al-Maghribi was found and pulled from rubble in the town of Atarib in Syria. He was declared dead by doctors, who apparently put his body in a refrigerator for two days until he could be identified by family members, who then took the body bag to the cemetery for a funeral procession. At this point, the dead man started to move, and Ahmed was removed from the body bag alive and well. His stunned family rushed him back to hospital, where he was said to be recovering. *dailystar.co.uk*, 22 Feb 2023.

SIDELINES...

GULL JAM

At a dessert manufacturer in Somerset, a herring gull bit off more than it could chew when it dived into a bin full of custard and jam after the lid was briefly left open. Unable to clamber out, the sticky and obstreperous bird was retrieved with a net and taken to the nearby Secret World Animal Rescue centre, where it was cleaned up and kept for a few days before being released. *S.Mirror*, 25 Sept 2022.

UNDERGROUND SEX TOYS

Transport for London reported that nine sex toys, six packs of Viagra, 81 wigs and 422 crutches were among the items left on London Transport in 2021. They also found 22,696 phones and £125,000 in cash. Half the phones were reclaimed, but none of the sex toys, although two people returned for their Viagra. *Metro*, 14 Apr 2022.

CUDDLING AND DRIVING

Police who pulled over a suspected drunk driver on the M6 at Stafford found that the suspect was completely sober, but that her erratic behaviour was the result of attempting to drive while cuddling a cat. *S.Mirror*, 24 Jul 2022.

VEGAN CANNIBAL

During an altercation in a car park following a football game in Fayetteville, Arkansas, Douglas Ramsey, 53, Chief Operating Officer of the vegan meat alternative company Beyond Meat, attacked another driver. After punching the other car’s window in, he “bit the owner’s nose, ripping the flesh on the tip”. Police arrested Ramsey at the scene and charged him with making terrorist threats and third-degree battery. *thedailybeast.com*, 19 Sept 2022.

UNWELCOME RETURN

When metal detectorist Steve Andrews found a wedding ring in St Aubin’s Bay, Jersey, he posted his find on Facebook hoping to reunite it with its owner. After 200 shares he was successful, but to his surprise the owner said, “throw it back into the sea please!”. She had hurled it into the waters off Jersey 33 years ago after a bad divorce and said, “I never want to see it again.” *Metro*, 24 Oct 2022.



SIDELINES...

THREE-EYED DEER

Skinning a deer that had been sent to him for mounting, Jon Wilson of Double Nickel Taxidermy in New Braunfels, Texas, found that a lump on the left cheek beneath the eye was actually a whole third eye under the skin. "This is definitely the weirdest thing we have seen," he said. National Deer Association spokesperson Lindsay Thomas Jr said: "We track a lot of weird deer here at the NDA. Last year, we reported on a deer that had hair growing on the corneas of its eyeballs, but we have never seen a three-eyed deer." *fieldandstream.com*, 14 Nov 2022.

UNHAPPY CHRISTMAS

When Jason Christmas, 42, attempted to rob a bank in Huntington, Michigan, he took an Uber to the bank and asked the driver to wait outside. Completely unaware of Christmas's intentions, the driver duly waited and then took him home. However, police had already identified Christmas as the thief and were waiting there for him. Police Chief Elvin Barren said: "This is a very unusual way to commit an armed robbery in our city." It was believed Christmas had robbed the bank to pay for seasonal gifts. *mirror.co.uk*, 19 Nov 2022.

BIDEN PORTAL

Long standing Donald Trump crony Roger Stone, speaking in an interview on a right-wing radio show, claimed that "a demonic portal opened above the White House around the time that the Bidens moved in." It is "swirling like a cauldron," he insisted, saying a Florida Christian had shown him a "live cam where you can actually see it in real-time", although radio host Eric Metaxas pointed out that this "sounds insane". *yahoo.com*, 16 Dec 2022.



DRIVING ME CRAZY

Improbable scientific research from the world of motoring



FERRARI

ANTIVAX ACCIDENTS?

Researchers in Canada have published a study in the *American Journal of Medicine* that suggests a correlation between a person's Covid vaccine status and the probability of them being involved in a road accident. Examining the medical records of 11 million adults, 16 per cent of whom had not had a Covid vaccination, they discovered that unvaccinated people were 72 per cent more likely to be involved in a severe road accident, defined as one in which at least one person needed hospital treatment, than those who had received the vaccine. The increased risk from unvaccinated drivers "exceeds the safety gains from modern automobile engineering advances and also imposes risks on other road users" according to the researchers, and while it is only half the increased risk of that posed by drink drivers, it is comparable to the risk posed by people who are deprived of sleep due to sleep apnoea.

The paper is not suggesting that being vaccinated in some way improves your driving skills, but proposes that

opposition to government-imposed public health measures is likely to be a result of a distrust in government, a belief in "freedom", faith in "natural protection" or a misconception of everyday risks. All of these could potentially also lead people to "neglect basic road safety guidelines" researchers suggest. "The findings suggest that unvaccinated adults need to be careful indoors with other people and outside with surrounding traffic," they concluded. The study was widely mocked online as being a gift to car insurance companies wanting to hike their premiums, as well as another way of 'othering' the unvaccinated. *fortune.com*, 13 Dec 2023.

SMALL MEN, FAST CARS

In a preprint paper, yet to be peer reviewed, psychologists claim to have found evidence that men with small penises really do overcompensate by driving fast cars. Professor Daniel C Richardson of the Experimental Psychology department at University College London (UCL) and his team carried out an experiment

in which 200 English-speaking males aged between 18 and 74 years were given an online task that they were told was about their ability to remember facts while shopping. Before each round they were briefly shown a statement and a picture of a product and asked to say how much they would like to own the product. In among the questions there were statements about average penis size and these were always followed by a picture of a sports car. Some of the statements were designed to lead participants to believe their penis was larger than average, while others suggested it was smaller.

When Professor Richardson and his team analysed the results, they found that those who had been led to believe their penis was below average size were more likely to rate sports cars as highly desirable, with the trend being most marked in men over 30. "Perhaps there is just something specific linking cars and penises in the male psyche," said Professor Richardson. *iflscience.com*, 11 Jan 2023.

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PAUL SIEVEKING rounds up the latest finds, from Syrian spherulites to a Somerset Medusa

FARMING ORIGINS

Animals were being farmed for food as early as 13,000 years ago, an analysis of ancient dung suggests. Hunter-gatherers living in Abu Hureyra – the Upper Euphrates valley in Syria – were bringing sheep and other live animals and tending to them outside their huts. This is almost two millennia earlier than what is seen elsewhere. Soil samples were gathered from Abu Hureyra in the 1970s, but have only recently been analysed. The scientists looked at substances present in the soil known as dung spherulites – tiny balls that form in the intestines of plant-eating animals before being excreted from the body as part of dung. These spherulites provided an approximate date for the dung deposits, sometime between 12,800 and 12,300 years ago. The dung is thought to be from sheep – one of the earliest animals to be domesticated.

The hunter-gatherers living at Abu Hureyra at the time were tending the very earliest domestic sheep which were small-scale household animals. They began to rely on sheep to supplement a diet based mostly on hunted gazelle, although they also caught small game such as birds, hare and fox. Then eventually, by the Neolithic period (between 10,600–7,800 years ago), herded animals such as sheep and goats became more important than hunted ones.

The evidence suggests that as the dung built up outside the huts of the hunter-gatherers, it was put to use as a fuel. When dung is burned, it gives off a steady, high temperature that can be used to cook and provide light and warmth. During the Neolithic period, when dung accumulations were even more abundant, people used the excess as a building material to help create plaster floors. Of course, dung continues to be used as a fuel and a construction material in many parts of the world. *Irish Examiner*, 14 Sept 2022.

GATEHOUSE UNEARTHED

Archaeologists working on the route of HS2 excavated a stretch of pasture in Warwickshire and found the stone bases of two towers from a late mediaeval fortified gatehouse, the existence of which had been completely lost to history. Peppering the sandstone walls were hundreds of pockmarks made by musket balls and pistol shot, showing that the building had come under heavy fire. Experts think this may be evidence that the gatehouse was shot at by parliamentarian troops heading to the nearby Battle of Curdworth Bridge in August 1642, which would make this the scene of

the very first skirmish of the Civil War.

The team knew that a large Tudor manor house had stood somewhere near the site at Coleshill, east of Birmingham, but its location had been lost. As they started excavating, they were astonished at the state of preservation of its vast ornamental gardens – larger in scale than at Hampton Court. In the lead up to the Civil War, which pitched forces loyal to King Charles I against parliamentarian soldiers, Coleshill Manor was in the hands of a royalist, Simon Digby. The position of his grand

home, next to a key strategic crossing of the River Cole, would have put it directly in the path of Roundheads on the march to Curdworth Bridge. *theguardian.com*, 21 Jan 2023.

ANCIENT ROUNDELS

Archaeologists digging in the district of Vinohrady near Prague in the Czech Republic have discovered the remains of a structure that predates Stonehenge and the Egyptian pyramids – an enigmatic complex known as a roundel. Nearly 7,000 years ago, during the late Neolithic, a local farming community may have gathered in this circular building, about 180ft (55m) in diameter, although its purpose is unknown. Researchers first learned about the roundel's existence in the 1980s, when construction workers were laying gas and water pipelines, but the current dig has revealed the structure's entirety for the

The remains of a structure that predates Stonehenge and the Egyptian pyramids



HS2



CZECH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

TOP: The stone gatehouse towers uncovered at Coleshill, Warwickshire, along the route of HS2.

ABOVE: An aerial view of the ancient roundel discovered near Prague; its purpose remains unknown.

first time. The ditch fill has yielded pottery fragments, animal bones and stone tools and carbon-14 may provide an accurate date. The builders were part of the Stroked Pottery culture, which flourished between 4900 BC and 4400 BC. The people who made Stroked Pottery ware are known for building other roundels in the Bohemian region of the Czech Republic. Their sedentary farming villages consisted of several longhouses, which were large, rectangular structures that held 20 to 30 people each.

Roundels were not well-known ancient features until a few decades ago following aerial photographic surveys. It is now believed that roundels are the oldest evidence of architecture in the whole of Europe. Viewed from above, they consist of one or more wide, circular ditches with several gaps that functioned as entrances. The inner part of each roundel was likely lined with wooden poles, perhaps with mud plastering the gaps.

Hundreds of these circular earthworks have now been found throughout central Europe, all dating to just two or three centuries. In 1991, the earliest known example was found in Germany, also corresponding to the Stroked Pottery culture. Called the Goseck Circle, it is 246ft (75m) in diameter and had a double wooden palisade and three entrances. Because two of the entrances correspond with sunrise and sunset during the winter and summer solstices, one interpretation of the Goseck Circle is that it functioned as an observatory or calendar. Some archaeologists prefer a more general interpretation, suggesting that roundels probably combined several functions, the most important being socio-ritual. It is likely that roundels were built for gatherings of a large number of people, perhaps to commemorate events important to them as a community, such as rites of passage, astronomical phenomena, or economic exchange. Roundels suddenly disappeared from the archaeological record around 4600 BC. Why this happened is a mystery. *sciencealert.com*, 22 Sept 2022.

AMBUSH SITE CONFIRMED

Researchers have identified the metallurgic signature of the Roman 19th Legion in artefacts recovered from the Battle of Teutoburg Forest in Kalkriese, Germany, using a new chemical analysis method.



LEFT: The life-size Roman marble statue of Hercules that came to light during repairs to a sewerage system. **BELOW:** A bronze head of Medusa found by a farmer in Somerset.

complete horse bridle fittings and everyday items to the oldest set of Roman plate armour ever discovered in Germany; 550 non-ferrous samples were analysed and compared with samples from numerous Roman locations where it is known from written records which legions were stationed there. The metals used for repairs in the camp forges contain trace elements in such small amounts that the Roman forges did not notice them, and they were not intentionally manipulated. It is evident that the 19th Legion in particular, which perished with Varus and was stationed in Dangstetten in southern Germany years earlier, stands out from the other legions, which were only deployed later in Germany in the Roman vengeance campaigns. *arkeonews.net*, 5 Dec 2022.

ROMAN DISCOVERIES

- A life-size ancient Roman marble statue of Hercules has been discovered during repairs to the sewerage system underneath

a park in Rome. The statue emerged from the ground around the second mile mark along the ancient Appian Way. *the guardian.com*, 27 Jan 2023.

- About six years ago, an unnamed farmer in Somerset unearthed a bronze head of Medusa, thought to date to the Roman period; she kept it in a drawer; last October it was offered at auction but failed to sell. Medusa, also known as Gorgo, was one of three monstrous Gorgons – winged human females with living venomous snakes in place of hair – in Greek mythology.

Those who gazed into her eyes would turn to stone. The story goes that Medusa was beheaded by Perseus, who then used her head – which retained its ability to turn onlookers to stone – as a weapon before giving it to the goddess Athena to place on her shield. *mirror.co.uk*, 9 Oct 2022.

The Roman defeat by Germanic tribes at the Battle of Teutoburg Forest in AD 9 sent shockwaves throughout the Roman empire. Three legions, totalling up to 20,000 men, were lost.

The characteristic composition of trace elements in an artefact can be identified by mass spectrometer analysis of non-ferrous metals like bronze and brass. Because each Roman legion had its own blacksmiths who worked constantly on the campaign to repair and replace weapons and equipment, even legions that fought together had a distinct chemical signature in their metals.

The discovery of coins and slingshot ammunition in a field in northeastern Germany in 1987 by Tony Clunn, a British army officer and amateur archaeologist, fuelled speculation that the battle site had been discovered, but until last year it was only a plausible theory.

Since 1987, more than 7,000 artefacts have been unearthed at Kalkriese, ranging from





CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

281: WHAT IS TRUTH? SAID JESTING PILATE

“All Autobiography is Fiction” – variously attributed from Disraeli to P D James

This claim is thoroughly thrashed out by Robert Tracy’s ‘Stranger than Truth: Fictional Autobiography and Autobiographical Fiction’, *Dickens Studies Annual* 15 (1986), 275-289.

Asked why he hadn’t written his memoirs, Marshall Pétain is said to have replied that he’d nothing to hide.

I gather Boris Johnson has contracted to write his Memoir, which “will be like no other”. One can readily believe that. Like him or loathe him, Boris is an engaging writer. His book on Rome was first-rate and his novel *Seventy-Two Virgins* great fun.

Naturally, this news has prompted me to adduce some ancient examples of autobiographical writings by dictators, emperors, and kings. As a good classicist, Boris will be familiar with much of this material.

For more detailed investigations see Gabriele Marasco, *Political Autobiographies and Memoirs in Antiquity* (2015) and James Westfall Thompson, ‘Lost Memoirs of Antiquity’, *The Sewanee Review* 27 (1919), 176-87.

Byron was spot on when opening his ‘Destruction of Sennacherib’ with “The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold”. These most dastardly of ancient peoples left their historical and kingly records in inscriptions and pictures rather than books – a primitive precursor of Instagram. As shown later, Roman emperor Augustus would employ the same form of dissemination.

The bulk of these records braggingly describe military conquests and punishments meted out to prisoners of war. No Geneva Convention here. Surviving examples are even more revolting than some in the Old Testament, and that’s saying something. Full details in Erika Belibtreu’s ‘Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death’, online.

Byron’s Sennacherib boasts (abridged): “I cut their throats like lambs. I spilled the contents of their gullets and entrails over the wide earth. Their testicles I cut off and tore out their privates like the seeds of cucumbers.”

Or these sanguinary braggings – I have



LEFT: Portrait head of Agrippina the Younger, about AD 50. Her lost Memoirs would have been a fascinating read.

gruesome. Many other inscriptions record Pharaonic travels, religious observances, dealings with foreign powers, even such mundane matters as the best wood for ship-building. For detailed examples, see Shi-wei-hsu, ‘The Palermo Stone: the Earliest Royal Inscription from Ancient Egypt’, online.

Darius I, ‘The Great’, had his record inscribed sometime between 522-486 BC on a rock face on Mount Behistun in Iran. Its Wikipedia entry provides full and minute details. The king describes his lineage, the size of his empire, and his military victories, including the suppression of many internal revolts. There are depictions of captives, but no sadistic details. Darius modestly attributes his successes to “The

Grace of Azuhura Mazda”, the first mention of this ‘Wise Lord’, the divine spirit that would animate Zoroastrianism.

Greece (likewise, Byzantium) will not long detain us. What would we give for a memoir by a Spartan king, Pericles, or (of course) Alexander the Great, who might have composed a memoir – he had plenty to write about and justify – had he lived longer. Failing these, on to Rome.

First, the bad news. Two of the most regrettably lost pieces of Roman literature are the Memoirs of the dictator Sulla (138-78 BC) and of Agrippina, wife and empress of Claudius and mother of Nero.

For Sulla’s, see the meticulous *Sulla and the Gods: Religion, Politics, and Propaganda in the Autobiography of Lucius Cornelius Sulla* by Fiona Mary Noble, doctoral thesis 2014, online, and Harriet Flower’s ‘The Rapture and the Sorrow: Characterization in Sulla’s Memoirs’, chapter 14 in (ed. Rhiannon Ash) *Fame and Infamy: Essays on Characterization in Greek and Roman Biography and Historiography* (2015).

(“Infamy, Infamy, They’ve all got it in for me!” – Kenneth Williams as the murdered Cæsar in *Carry On Cleo*)

Sulla’s Memoirs are frequently cited or paraphrased in Plutarch’s biography of him. They were twice cited by the scholarly Aulus Gellius (second-century AD) and as

coalesced several inscriptions into one: “I flayed as many nobles as had rebelled and draped their skins upon the pile of corpses... I burnt 200 captives... I burnt their young boys and girls... I cut off the hands and arms and noses and extremities of some... I gouged out the eyes of many... I piled up their heads and hung them on trees around the city.”

Many more such examples in Belibtreu – if you can stomach them. Here I bid good riddance to the Assyrians.

(Boris’s detractors, notably Harry Eyres at the *New Statesman*, claim he was a school bully and ardent wielder of a bamboo cane.)

Egyptian royal inscriptions are mercifully a good deal more palatable. Full details in Shih-wei-hsu, ‘The Development of Ancient Egyptian Royal Inscriptions’, *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 98 (2012), 269-83. Herodotus (bk2 ch125) says the local interpreters told him that Cheops’s inscription on the Great Pyramid recorded how much the Pharaoh had spent on leeks and onions for the workmen. Some moderns needlessly cast doubts on the veracity of this; see my vindication in ‘How Credulous was Herodotus?’ *Greece & Rome* 11 (1964), 167-77. What more natural than a Pharaoh boasting of his good works? Military braggings are less

late as the grammarian Priscian (c. AD 500) who (bk9 p476) quotes “The Republic was about to come to the utmost catastrophe”, giving Sulla’s title as *Res Suae* – there has been a long debate over his title and whether he wrote them in Latin or Greek, matters which need not here detain us.

Naturally, there is plenty of bragging over military victories. One signal aspect is the (elsewhere frequent in ancient historiography) absurd numbers of battle casualties: on one occasion, he claims to have slain 26,000, captured 8,000, himself losing only 23 men – that mystical number again! A prime motif is Sulla’s insistence on his prevailing good luck – he dubbed himself *Felix* (‘the happy one’).

One wonders how he justified his massive purges of perceived Roman enemies. Also, what he said about his famously horrible death. Plutarch says he was writing his memoirs up to two days before he expired. The biographer (ch 36) provides the following horrendous details, which I will quote via the translation of Sir Thomas Browne in his *Of the Oracle of Apollo*:

“He fell into a disease, which grew so leisurely upon him, as of a long time he perceived not his bowels to fester, till at length the corrupted flesh broke out into lice. Many being employed day and night in destroying them, the work so multiplied under their hands, that not only his Cloathes, Baths, Basons, but his very Meat was polluted with that Flux and Corruption, they came swarming out in such numbers.”

He was not the only ancient to suffer this grisly fate. Christian writers gloated over the similar death of the persecuting emperor Galerius. Modern explanations talk about liver failure and chronic gastric ulcers which when broken caused the worms. For more, see TF Carney, ‘The Death of Sulla’, *Acta Classica* 4 (1961), 64-79.

I remember mentioning to one of our Classics beaks at school my regret at the loss of Agrippina’s memoirs. He retorted that she would have been incapable of telling the truth even had she wanted to.

Not the view of Tacitus (*Annals*, bk4 ch53) who describing her mother’s plea to Tiberius to find her a new husband says, “This episode, not recorded by the historian, I found in the Memoirs of her daughter who, as mother of the emperor Nero, gave posterity an account of her life and the fortunes of her family.”

Sir Ronald Syme (*Tacitus*, 1958, p.271) suggests that Tacitus’s account of her expostulating that she would not mind the dynasty’s crimes being exposed is “perhaps a gentle hint of the family history she went on to compose.”

She also gave the Elder Pliny (*Natural History*, bk7 ch8 para46) the information that Nero was born by breech birth. Such titbits serve to sharpen regrets at the loss. Pliny, who cites her Memoirs as a source for his book seven, doubtless there found the information that Agrippina herself had been born with a double set of molars

(‘dog-teeth’), supposedly auguring well for the future.

Dio Cassius (bk62 ch32 para 3) may also have got from her the story that when the head of her rival Lollia Paulina was brought to her, unable to identify her facially she confirmed who she was by examining Paulina’s famous teeth – the first example of detective dentition...

All this odontology sharpens regret at the loss of her Memoirs, which clearly were a blend of the public and the personal.

Back-tracking to Julius Caesar, his Civil and Gallic Wars narratives do not constitute a full autobiography, which he might have written, had he survived the Ides of March. According to an online article by Francesco Strocchi, Caesar may have employed Sulla’s Memoirs as a ‘counter-model’.

To give an air of pseudo-objectivity, Caesar refers to himself in the third person, as had done Thucydides. His military achievements are catalogued, without modesty or horror. He could not, of course, revel in the slaughter of fellow-Romans. As well the Gallic Wars have no Assyrian-style sadistic bragging, since in his official report to the Senate he calculated that these campaigns had claimed 1,200,000 lives – horror enough.

His Gallic Wars kicked off with “All Gaul is divided into three parts”, a statement described by Bernard Shaw as “Neither true nor interesting, but at least intelligible”. His account of the British invasion of 55 BC was our first real schoolboy encounter with Latin literature.

Problem was not his Latin but the length of his sentences – we would frantically turn the page in the hope of finding a full stop. If only he had written them in the terse style of his *Veni Vidi Vici*...

In his biography of Augustus (ch85), Suetonius says that he wrote a memoir in 13 books down to his Cantabrian Wars (29-19 BC). A few scattered fragments remain. Full details in the multi-authored *The Lost Memoirs of Augustus*, ed.

Christopher Smith & Anton Powell, 2009.

Suetonius does not explain why Augustus stopped where he did. Near the end of his life (AD 14), reverting to Assyrian-Egyptian style, he disseminated copies of his *Res Gestæ* (Achievements) across the Empire. Most important of the surviving copies is the bilingual one in Ankara, Turkey.

Syme in his epochal and controversial study of Augustus, *The Roman Revolution* (1939), published shortly before the World War began – Syme claimed that his cynical view of the emperor was inspired by events and personalities in 1930s Europe – summed up thus (p.522): “It would be imprudent to treat it as a sure guide to history, petulant and pointless to complain of omission and misrepresentation”. Boris’s critics must already be preparing such complaints...

His prose is straightforward, indeed dead-pan. He will have wanted as many people as possible, including those with limited literacy, to be able to read it. While not guilty of downright factual falsifications, we can defy Syme and complain of omissions. Most notable is his suppression of names. Brutus and Cassius are reduced to the anonymous “Those who killed my father”; Antony and Cleopatra are likewise onomastically obliterated. His military victories are retailed in brief, without any ghastliness of detail. Much space is devoted to his privately financed donations of money and food to the Roman populace and his soldiery, stressing his personal generosity. In short, he comes across as an omni-beneficial Big Brother. Such an official document was no place for personal titbits.

Several Roman emperors wrote their autobiographies. All, sadly, have perished. However, they have proved fertile ground for modern novelists, following Peter Green’s *The Sword of Pleasure* (1957), re-creating Sulla’s Memoirs. Robert Graves’s Claudius novels are the best-known, much helped by the BBC television adaptation. Alan Massie did the same for Tiberius’s (1993). After Graves, the most notable effort in this genre was the *Mémoires d’Hadrien* (English translation available) by Marguerite Yourcenar in 1951.

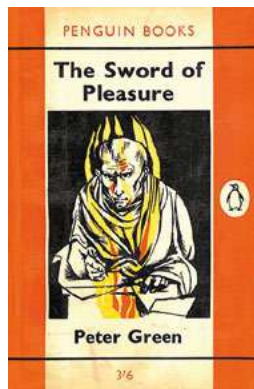
The novel is in the form of a letter to Hadrian’s adoptive grandson and successor Marcus Aurelius. Now, in 2018, the Oriental Institute Museum of the University

of Chicago published (on Facebook) a papyrus taken to contain the only surviving scrap of Hadrian’s original. Discovered by the famous papyrologists Grenfell and Hunt (immortalised by Tony Harrison in his play *The Trackers of Oxyrhyncus*), the text is on the back of a late second-century AD tax document. It is part of a letter written by Hadrian to his successor Antoninus Pius, clearly just before the emperor’s death in 138. Or

so it seems. There is more information, albeit sometimes muddled, from Carole Raddato’s ‘Following Hadrian’ website, complete with papyrus illustration. Her assumption that Hadrian wrote his autobiography in epistolary form, clearly influenced by Yourcenar, does not follow: a straightforward memoir could easily have contained specimen letters.

As with Pompeii and Herculaneum, let us hope the sands of Egypt will continue to yield more of the many lost literary treasures of which we know but cannot yet know properly.

“Fort was not much concerned with the elements of true biography as he was in recollecting his youth in his own literary style” – ‘Mr X’, online editor of *Many Parts*, the remnants of Fort’s autobiography, online.





Ghost writer in the machine

Have FT columnists been rendered redundant by ChatGPT? DAVID HAMBLING is a worried man...

You may not have heard of chatbots before, but chances are you have read a recent news story about ChatGPT from OpenAI or rival Bing from Microsoft or Bard from Google. These artificial intelligence apps give apparently intelligent, if occasionally bizarre, responses to questions. They can write an essay on Keynesian economics, produce a Shakespearean sonnet about a nightingale or create computer code instantly to order. Will these digital Frankenstein monsters eclipse humanity, or is it just more hype from Big Tech?

Older readers will remember stories or poems “written by a computer” from long ago and may be wary of the latest claims.

Experiments with automated text generation were well-enough known in the 17th century for Jonathan Swift to parody them in *Gulliver’s Travels*. A mad scientist on the island of Laputa demonstrates a mechanism of rotating blocks combining words in new ways so “the most ignorant person at a reasonable charge, and with a little bodily labour, may write books in philosophy, poetry, politics, law, mathematics, and theology, without the least assistance from genius or study”. It outputs gibberish with occasional fragments that might be assembled into sentences. (See **FT339:14** for more on the Ars Combinatoria.)

Machine scribes only took off with the advent of electronic computers. Linguist Joseph Grimes may havDXX according to standard rules: “A LION HAS BEEN IN TROUBLE FOR A LONG TIME. A DOG STEALS SOMETHING THAT BELONGS TO THE LION. THE HERO, LION, KILLS THE VILLAIN, DOG, WITHOUT A FIGHT. THE HERO, LION, THUS IS ABLE TO GET HIS POSSESSION BACK.”

Grimes abandoned the storytelling machine because its attempts were “all boring,” and instead used computers to analyse the structure of folktales.

The Policeman’s Beard Is Half Constructed published in 1984 was marketed as the first book written by a computer. It is credited to Racter, short for raconteur, software created by William Chamberlain and Thomas Etter. The book is surreal, whimsical and repetitive and much of it, like the Laputan invention’s output, may have been somewhat rearranged to read better: “Tomatoes from England and lettuce from Canada are eaten by cosmologists from Russia. I dream implacably about this concept. Nevertheless tomatoes or lettuce inevitably can come leisurely from my home, not merely from



Will these digital Frankenstein monsters eclipse humanity, or is it just hype from Big Tech?

England or Canada...”

These snippets are enough to give an idea of how such algorithms work: they have a sentence structure and plug nouns, adjectives and verbs into the appropriate slots in a way that appears to make sense. To be more plausible, software needs to know which words go together: tomatoes can be red or squishy or Spanish, but not scaly, furry or illiterate. Making good sense requires either a complex set of rules or a huge database of valid examples.

The modern chatbots are based on machine learning; rather than having a model of the world, they base their output on existing phrases in the gigantic quantities of text they have been trained on. So ChatGPT, for example, asked about Beethoven, is able to parrot phrases it has read and assemble them in a coherent order to explain that he was “a German composer and pianist who lived from 1770 to 1827... widely considered to be one of the greatest composers in the history of Western classical music.”

Although this type of cut-and-paste may seem like a fairly simple trick not requiring any real intelligence, stringing words together in reasonably standardised forms has plenty of practical applications. ChatGPT’s vast wealth of data means it can turn out essays on every topic imaginable, and, as teachers have confirmed, gives convincing answers to standard exam questions. ChatGPT recently passed a University of Pennsylvania Business MBA exam, four law school exams from the University of Minnesota, and a clinical

reasoning exam at Stanford Medical School. This capability has produced near-panic and a slew of AI-detection software to prevent students from submitting essays written by chatbots, already a massive issue.

Others use the technology professionally. A survey by *Nature* magazine found readers using chatbots to conduct literature reviews and summarise material, to write grant applications, to produce presentations and course material, and for brainstorming. The publisher of the *Daily Mirror* is looking at ChatGPT to help write local news stories, and many others have doubtless already gone down this path. Copywriters, bloggers and others use chatbots to produce a first draft they can quickly edit into publishable form.

Chatbots are also competent at writing computer code to create simple applications, and can debug programs and write web pages based on English-language commands. Future software developers may become more like managers overseeing code-writing ‘bots.

However, chatbots have the same limitation as any information processing system, including humans: they are only as good as their source material. So when one of Bard’s sample answers included an incorrect statement about the James Webb Space Telescope being the first to produce an image of a planet in another solar system, Google shares plummeted.

And of course people delight in trying to get chatbots to say crazy things, produce racist, sexist or otherwise unacceptable statements, or just try to trip them up. At the moment this is not too difficult, as the obliging machine attempts to answer everything. Developers are busily building in patches and safeguards as soon as weak points are identified. Well-publicised failures lead many to sneer at chatbots. At this point this may be like criticising the Wright Flyer for its limited range. They work, and they are getting better.

On the one hand chatbots are emphatically not intelligent. They may give an illusion of intelligence, just as a chess-playing computer may seem to have the brain of a grandmaster, but any wisdom they display is recycled from original human sources.

On the other hand, we are fast approaching the point where chatbots can turn out a useful answer or an article on any topic as well as a human, intelligent or not. This will give many of us – this writer included – pause for thought.



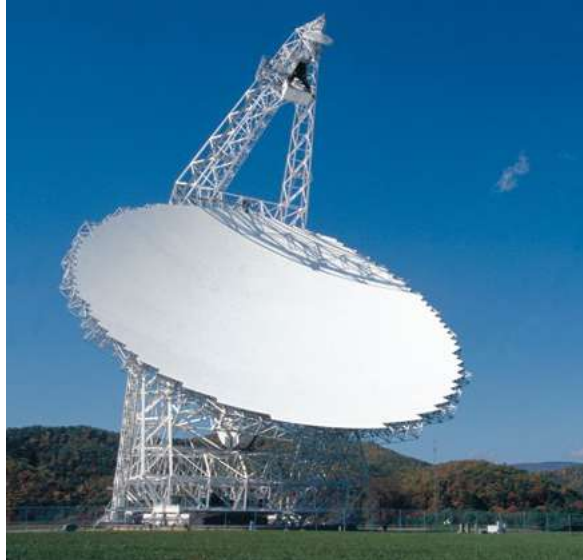
ANALYSING THE IMPROBABLE

New projects are using data analysis to shed light on forteen mysteries

SETI DATA CRUNCHED

At the start of this year a University of Toronto project that used artificial intelligence (AI) in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) published its first results. The team used AI to comb through years of data collected by the Robert C Byrd Green Bank Telescope in West Virginia as part of the Breakthrough Listen SETI initiative to see if there were potential alien signals hidden in it that scientists had missed. Peter Ma, lead author of the paper, said: "In many of our observations, there is a lot of interference. We need to distinguish the exciting radio signals in space from the uninteresting radio signals from Earth," and so an AI system had been trained to do precisely that.

To qualify as potentially alien, the signals had to be, firstly, narrowband, taking up just a few hertz of the electromagnetic spectrum; natural phenomena tend to generate broadband signals. Secondly, they had to indicate acceleration relative to the receivers, which suggests they are not close to the radio observatory. Finally, they had to appear to originate from a specific celestial source. This means that when the telescope was pointing at the star it picked up the signal, but this disappeared when the telescope moved away; human radio interference usually continues when the telescope moves. The AI combed through 480 hours of recordings relating to 820 stars, amounting to 150 terabytes of data that researchers had examined manually in 2017 without identifying anything interesting. The AI, though, turned up eight potential alien signals coming from the direction of five stars between 30 and 90 light years away. However, there is no evidence that the signals have repeated, which would be needed for them to further qualify as from a potentially intelligent source, and there has been no attempt to decode them to see if they contain messages.



ABOVE LEFT: A University of Toronto team has been using AI to comb through data collected by The Robert C Byrd Green Bank Telescope in West Virginia. ABOVE RIGHT: Data scientist Floe Foxon (right) and partner Dr Arielle Selya on a trip to Loch Ness.



FLOE FOXON / TWITTER

While inconclusive, the discovery provides targets that researchers can investigate in greater depth and demonstrates a technique which can now be applied to more SETI data. *earthsky.org*, 5 Feb 2023.

SASQUATCH STATISTICS

Also using data analysis to address forteen mysteries, data scientist Floe Foxon turned his attention to the world of cryptozoology and applied rigorous statistical analysis to sightings of Sasquatch and the Loch Ness Monster.

In a paper posted on the bioRxiv preprint server, used to publish papers yet to undergo peer review, entitled "If it's there, could it be a bear?" Foxon has looked at correlations between Sasquatch sightings and black bear populations across the US and Canada. This builds on previous research that looked at the relationship between Sasquatch sightings across the Pacific Northwest and populations of brown and black bears, as Sasquatch are said to be roughly the size and shape of a bear walking on its hind legs. This found that there was no relationship between Sasquatch sightings and brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) populations, but that

there was one for black bear (*Ursus americanus*) populations. Using sightings recorded in the Sasquatch Field Researchers Organization Geographic Database of Bigfoot/Sasquatch Sightings & Reports that included data from the second half of the 20th century up to the present day, Foxon compared them to black bear population records from all states where they are present in continental North America. In order to make a proportionate analysis, he controlled for the population of each state and its land area, as interactions between the humans and Sasquatch will be related to the number of people in an area and the space available in which an encounter can occur. Foxon put all this into a linear mixed-effects regression model and the result indicated that the black bear population was significantly associated with Sasquatch reports such that, on average, one Sasquatch sighting is expected for every 900 black bears in a given state or province. This led him to conclude that many supposed Sasquatch sightings in North America are likely misidentified black bear, or as he eloquently put it, "If bigfoot is there, it may be many bears". However, the result could also

suggest that Sasquatch sightings are under-reported where they can be mistaken for bears, as he does observe that Sasquatch reports also come from Florida and Texas, which do not have black bear populations.

Foxon's companion paper "If it's real, could it be an eel?" also posted on the bioRxiv server, probes the hypothesis that Loch Ness Monster sightings could be explained by the presence of giant eels (*Anguilla anguilla*) in the loch by estimating the probability of observing eels of the required size. To do this, he used catch data for eels from Loch Ness and other freshwater bodies in Europe and plotted a size distribution. This led to the conclusion that there is a probability of finding a one-metre-long eel in Loch Ness of around 1 in 50,000, which seems reasonable given the Loch's fish stocks, so some sightings of smaller "monsters" could be due to misidentified eels. However, for sightings of larger creatures, the probability of finding a specimen upwards of six metres (20ft) is essentially zero, which means that eels probably do not account for reports of larger monsters, based purely on statistical considerations. *bioRxiv.org*, 18 Jan, 13 Feb 2023.



When the spooks were spooked

ALAN MURDIE looks at the haunted history of the secretive Chicksands Priory military base



ABOVE: The east elevation and main entrance to the 12th century Gilbertine Priory of Chicksands as it appears today.

As one considers the multitude of reputedly haunted places in the UK, one notices that a small number of locations persistently generate reports of activity, year in, year out. One such location that has done so over the last 70 years in Britain is Chicksands Priory in Bedfordshire, a place which many ghost hunters have heard about but few have entered. Now a new book by Damien O'Dell, *Chicksands Priory – England's Most Haunted House?* published in November 2022, provides the most detailed study yet to appear of a long-term haunting at the site.

The difficulties of penetrating the mysteries of ancient Chicksands Priory are due to the sensitivities of its modern military role and location. Prior to 2005 only a handful of ghost hunters were granted access. One was Andrew Green (1927-2004) in 1972 when a Captain Kennett, then serving with the United States Air Force (USAF), assisted him with a wealth of material, some of which duly appeared as the first entry in Green's *Our Haunted Kingdom* (1973) a county-by-county guide to contemporary British hauntings.

The Priory's history begins with the foundation of a building dedicated to Saint

The base formed part of a secretive communications facility maintained by the USAF

Gilbert in 1150 by Countess Rohese, whose husband, Geoffrey de Mandeville, Earl of Essex and High Bailiff, rebelled against the king. Perhaps in penance for the crimes of her husband (de Mandeville's ghost traditionally haunts locations stretching from Camlet Moat in Enfield Chase to West Suffolk; see **FT408:16-19**) Rohese established the house in her widowhood.

The Priory was unusual in housing both nuns and monks under the same roof, one of a handful of such cloistered establishments which survived until the Reformation. Being a mixed sex institution encouraged scandalous gossip and rumours of forbidden liaisons between monks and nuns. Evidence emerged in 1534 when Dr Richard Layton wrote to Thomas Cromwell, saying that upon visiting

the priory he discovered "two... nunnes not baron [barren]" one having been impregnated by a serving man, the other by a superior.

On dissolution under Henry VIII, the Priory was converted into an aristocratic domestic residence, first the seat of the Snowe family and then of the Osborns. The property was given a thoroughly Gothic makeover during the 18th century with some antique portions preserved within. Its history meant it became one of the many formerly cloistered locations tainted with the widespread legend of a fallen nun impregnated by a wicked monk, with both being executed.

At Chicksands, she is named 'Rosata', tradition averring she was cruelly walled up alive upon her pregnant condition becoming obvious and her clerical paramour suffering beheading or hanging. These legends were widely believed into the 20th century (Andrew Green was perhaps a little too willing to believe them), and they have generated many a ghost tale. At Chicksands, Rosata returns as a cyclic ghost, manifesting every 17th of each month, with August being the most favoured. Other tales dub her 'Berta



ABOVE: The main gate of RAF Chicksands photographed in 1995 when it was still leased to the United States Air Force as a listening station.

Rosata' or simply 'the Wayward Nun', with accounts of her appearances dating from the early 20th century.

In 1936 Chicksands Priory was acquired as an RAF base. What remained of the original priory house was transformed into an officers' mess, a role continued by the United States Airforce, who took charge in 1950.

Thereafter, the base formed part of a secretive communications facility maintained by the USAF throughout the Cold War confrontation with the USSR, and in monitoring operations in the Vietnam and the Yom Kippur War. Chicksands continued operating as a USAF listening station until 1995, when it was closed and control passed first to the RAF and then in 1997 to the British Intelligence and Security Centre, an agency established by the RAF, Army and Navy to oversee covert operations.

Given this long and rather clandestine history, it is all the more curious Chicksands has become known as a premier haunted location. Seeing a ghost seems to contradict the gold standard of modern rationality upon which public policy and military thinking officially base themselves. But informally many military personnel prove remarkably open to the occurrence of paranormal events. They are a 24-hour service, often alone and awake and making decisions at hours of the night when most mortals are abed, the very time spontaneous paranormal events are most prevalent. Personnel are also often well placed to witness haunting phenomena at

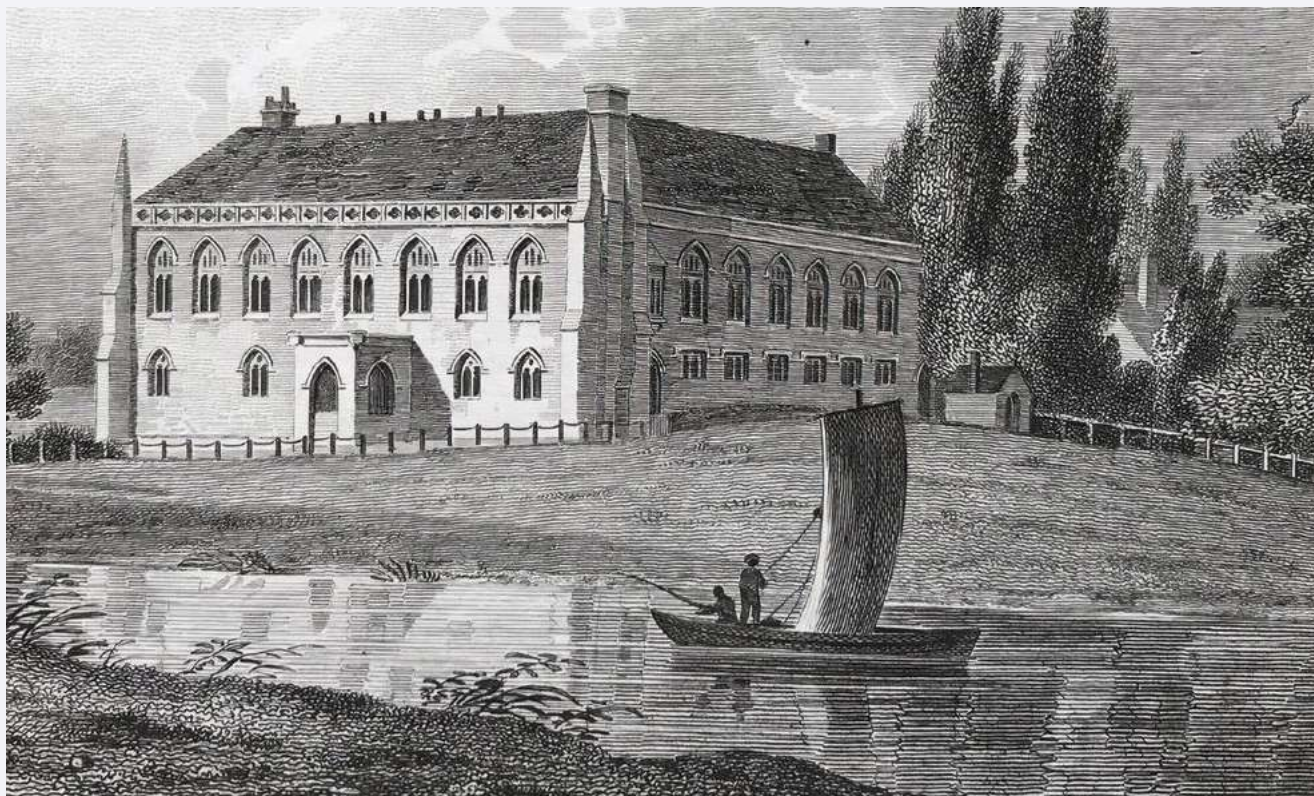
otherwise restricted and remote locations, especially during long hours of sentry duty and monitoring.

Among incidents recorded was an instance in 1954 when a Flight Lieutenant awoke at 3.45am and switched on the light to see "a woman with a ruddy face and untidy hair, wearing a dark dress with a white lace collar". The figure moved to the end of his bed and vanished. Three years later, in March 1957, another officer reported the phantom "of a middle-aged woman dressed in... a nun's head-dress", and a female staff member reported seeing a "fascinating woman dressed in white glide past me. I saw the long white train as she moved and heard the rustle of the dress." This was at 10 o'clock in the evening in the picture gallery. Then during the 1960s "a figure of a woman dressed in black" was also seen walking in the gallery, the witness noticing it had long hair covering its facial features.

Apparitions were also observed in the open air around the base. On 29 December 1975 one of the most interesting sightings came from serviceman Harry Cartzendafner, who was walking past the Priory when he noticed a figure walking the grounds. He presumed it was human until it veered over to the Priory building and rose into the air, ascending diagonally towards an upstairs room. Damien O'Dell proposes this behaviour indicates a replay-type of apparition seen walking up the course of a long-removed staircase. But it also brings to mind an uncanny sighting in Surrey almost

exactly a century before, in either 1875 or 1876, where a white figure was seen gliding in mid-air past the upstairs window of the officers' mess at Aldershot Barracks. This extraordinary sighting, which might be dubbed 'Spring-heeled Jill' (see **F7218:55**) is recorded in volume two of that classic of early psychical research, *Phantasms of the Living* (1886), edited by Edmund Gurney, Frederic Myers and Frank Podmore.

In September 1976, Tony Broughall, a member of the Society for Psychical Research, undertook a vigil accompanied by two clairvoyants and a journalist named John Winter. Thermometers placed in strategic locations showed no significant alterations in temperature, but a strange patch of 'solid' atmosphere was encountered and two clairvoyants saw "a pale grey mist approximately the height and breadth of a human form in the middle of the room". John Winter later reported: "The area where we felt the cold spot was well defined. It was about one foot by two feet [30 to 60cm] and shoulder height from the floor." When others took turns to stand in this corner, almost everyone experienced either a giddiness, an oppressive atmosphere and a further build-up of unexplained cold spots about six feet (1.8m) in height by two feet (60cm) square. As suddenly as these were felt, they would disperse again. Later, the menacing apparition of a nun, estimated between 50 to 60 years of age, was perceived clairvoyantly. Psychic intuitions are difficult to corroborate, but all present



felt that something paranormal was occurring. Certain mediumistic impressions also suggested a connection to Sir Danvers Osborn, third baronet of Chicksands and colonial governor of New York, who committed suicide on 12 October 1753 in a fit of depression, never having recovered from the death of his wife, Lady Mary Montagu, in childbirth in 1743. Those familiar with the works of archaeologist and dowser TC Lethbridge (1901-1971) might see parallels with what Lethbridge called 'a ghoul' (see **FT425:32-33**), a dynamic patch of cold air representing a psychic imprint attaching to a particular location (See *Two Haunted Counties* (2010) by Tony Broughall).

In December 1998, the *Sunday Times* announced: "Britain's spies have been spooked. Military intelligence officers may deploy electronic surveillance equipment to hunt for ghosts in the 850-year-old abbey that is their new headquarters." Brigadier Chris Holtom, the centre's director, was quoted as saying: "The ghosts are talking to us. It's ironic that an intelligence organisation should be haunted, but the Priory is rotten with memories, echoes of the past that are still with us today."

Balls of white light were glimpsed floating in mid-air across the billiard room, officers heard childish laughter echoing from unoccupied rooms, a female figure was seen twice and two guard dogs with perfect records for obedience and bravery refused to go near the priory. Staff had previously

"The Priory is rotten with memories, echoes of the past that are still with us today"



ridiculed the stories about Rosata, the suicidal baronet and the claim of up to "nine spirits" in the building but no more (*Sunday Times* and *Calgary Herald*, 20 Dec 1998).

In May 2001, Channel 4's *Time Team* conducted some televised excavations and removed the bones of a woman aged about 45 at the time of death. It

ABOVE: Chicksands Priory in the 1830s.

LEFT: Sir Danvers Osborn, Third Baronet of Chicksands.

was speculated that she was a member of the lay community rather than from the Gilbertine Order. Her remains were eventually returned nearly four years later and laid to rest by the military chaplain in August 2005.

The return of the bones coincided with a resumption of investigations, including a series of vigils conducted by Damien O'Dell of Hertfordshire and members the Anglia Paranormal Investigation Society (APIS). Most remarkable was their vigil held at Christmas 2005, which exceeded expectations. As Damian said: "I don't think we were prepared for what some of our team saw."

Three different teams on three separate occasions all said the same thing – that they'd seen a monk. "They couldn't see its face but could see its hood, and it glided noiselessly through the priory, on one occasion floating through a wall." From these promising results Damien has continued to monitor reports ever since. Summarising nearly two decades of research, he concludes: "Chicksands has multiple hauntings of every description. There's the prioress who haunts the place, kids who run around in the kitchen, and a monk who was spotted three times during our investigation."

With its secretive history, Chicksands Priory is a difficult site to assess, with many thousands of service personnel having passed through it over the last 75 years. When Andrew Green first logged events, he listed Chicksands as having a predominance of visual experiences and only one physical incident, a serviceman who felt his ankles being seized.

With the addition of nearly 50 more years of reports, it is clear the alleged phenomena are far more diverse and spread across the senses, including sounds (footsteps, coughing, disembodied voices and harpsichord music), tactile sensations (pushing, pulling and touches) and object movements. Temperature variations and the adverse reactions of animals also feature.

Visual sightings involve primarily a phantom female figure who on account of a hood or headgear is perceived as a 'nun' or 'prioress'. Of course, the postulated identification as 'Rosata' or even of it being a nun, must be doubtful, considering the differing descriptions (a point recently made by an audience member at a lecture given by Dr Mike Dash for the Ghost Club (14 Jan 2023) on artists' impressions of paranormal sightings involving witness reports of robes and clerical garb, which often diverge markedly from actual reality of historic costumes; drawings of the 'nun' at Borley are a prime example). Furthermore, as Green himself observed, "What is puzzling... is that only two seem to match the description of a nun and the experiences involved vary considerably", with other descriptions of a woman in black, a woman in white, a "ruddy-faced woman" and a small elderly woman. In addition, other visual forms at Chicksands include monk-like figures, amorphous shapes, white forms and black ones, broadly human-shaped.

This may lead sceptics then to cite discrepancies between individual testimonies as a reason for dismissing them and asserting that eyewitness sightings cannot be relied upon and should be viewed as inherently unreliable.

Certainly, some caveats may attach to eyewitness testimony. Impressions which are momentary must of necessity be very vague and elusive in the subsequent memory. There is also a risk of details being filled in after hearing the descriptions of others, so that features discerned or believed to be common become more definite in later recollection. The image which remains in the memories of all the percipients is apt to resemble a composite photograph, in which all the common features are emphasised.

However, I think such divergences in descriptions are open to a wider range of possible interpretations than parsimonious explanations might initially encompass.

Testimonies do frequently diverge when gathered from separate eyewitnesses to actual events, but that does not mean we can discount all such evidence as inaccurate (and it would be suspicious in itself to find accounts which perfectly matched and tallied in every particular). In the case of Chicksands, the sightings are spread over so many years that the chances of cross-contamination between separate witnesses are reduced.

In particular, what is also indicated is people do not hallucinate in accordance with popular tradition, at least regarding Chicksands Priory.

Perhaps the apparition at Chicksands Priory assumes a variety of forms, with different shapes at different times? Alternatively, there may be a collection of separate apparitions manifesting in the same house (the hypothesis preferred by Damien O'Dell).

Such speculations aside, it is clear that apparition sightings at Chicksands are consistent with the finding that experiences are more common when people are absorbed in ordinary activities and routine tasks. With many sightings it is often the case that the witness was thinking of "nothing in particular" and certainly not about ghosts.

Outside deployment and periods of high alert, many tasks in the military prove predictable, repetitive and undemanding, e.g. routine patrolling and guarding set locations, tasks where the actual enemy is boredom. In such a condition the mind may be prone to idling, a state that appears very conducive to apparitional experiences. At Chicksands, witnesses were typically either on duty, but not concentrating on anything specific or, alternatively, close to the point of sleep (again a common scenario with apparitional encounters).

This pattern is further illustrated with a frustrating personal experience which befell Damien O'Dell on one nocturnal vigil. Present with a colleague, Andy Taylor, he was in the process of setting up equipment, leaning over fixing a camera that the group was deploying on a tripod. At exactly that moment, Andy glimpsed the figure of a monk looking

BELOW: Damien O'Dell, whose new book presents his researches into strange phenomena at Chicksands Priory.

intently at them and then moving away up the corridor. Concentrating as he was upon the camera, Damien missed this fleeting appearance entirely. Such shyness of phenomena is long acknowledged; Andrew Green remarked: "Be prepared, therefore, for spending perhaps an hour on wiring up and sealing off an affected room, and waiting in a cold dark corridor surrounded by switches and wires, only to find that the phenomenon, if it starts at all, suddenly commences in another room on another floor of the building." (*Ghost Hunting: A Practical Guide*, 1973, 2016).

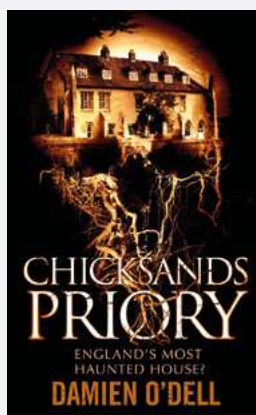
Overall, some 45 named witnesses have been recorded across the years reporting different manifestations. In the case of military personnel stationed at Chicksands, Damien O'Dell notes: "They were usually officers, who were young, fit, intelligent and absolutely certain of what they had experienced." Further, the press statements in 1998, if accurately reported, imply

yet more not included in this total; quite possibly many more may have not have been recorded at all. For his part, Damien reports on hearing scraping footsteps at Chicksands and was present when a set of quadrangle lights once failed entirely without obvious explanation.

New incidents continue to be gathered in 2023, most recently an account from a man in 1997 who recalls being pulled by the feet down the length of his bed, reminiscent of an earlier report from a serviceman in the 1950s.

What would be interesting would be to discover if any other Air Force facility within the UK (British or American) has generated a similar volume of experiences. As time goes on, many former air bases and airfields are acquiring ghostly reputations, but currently Chicksands Priory appears a unique site in being extensively haunted while simultaneously operating as a functioning military base.

Sources: Biggleswade Today, 28 Nov 2004; *The Devil a Monk Would Be: A Survey of Sex & Celibacy in Religion* (1945) by Clifford Longworth; *Our Haunted Kingdom* (1973) and *Phantom Ladies* (1977) by Andrew Green; *Chicksands Priory – England's Most Haunted House?* (2022) by Damien O'Dell available at <https://damienodell.com/>



THE CONSPIRASPHERE

The East Palestine train derailment has left residents with a fallout of toxic chemicals, dead animals and difficult questions. No wonder conspiracy theories abound, says **NOEL ROONEY**.

TOXIC TRACES

The train derailment near the small city of East Palestine, Ohio, on 3 February, was an instant human and environmental tragedy, and perhaps a slow-burning disaster in the making. Several elements of the unfolding story suggest that the incident, and the immediate response, may have been the result of negligence and incompetence. Mainstream and alternative media alike have pointed to the length of the train (twice as long as conventional rigs) and the decision to carry out a 'controlled burn' on the derailed carriages as contributory factors in the mass die-off of animals, fish and birds, and the stories of people made ill by the fallout.

East Palestine has known more than its fair share of difficulties. The area has suffered multiple earthquakes in recent years, a phenomenon hitherto unknown, which have been blamed on fracking operations in the vicinity. It has suffered badly from the economic downturn and the outsourcing of industry and labour. So the derailment, and the subsequent spill of toxic chemicals, must feel like the last straw for many of its embittered residents.

In the Conspirasphere, the developing disaster has excited a storm of speculation, some of it righteous indignation, some of it partisan prurience, and some of it highly strange. It's universally assumed that the train company, Norfolk Southern, is guilty of criminal negligence and that it is hiding the true nature of the cargo. Donald Trump's visit to the city galvanised an already simmering round of the political blame game. Weird coincidences – some real, some no doubt a little more imaginative – are traded like tokens of truth.

Did a Hollywood movie



The spill must feel like the last straw for many residents

prefigure the tragedy? That's a question a lot of people are asking, and not just in the maverick margins. The film *White Noise*, about a train derailment followed by a spill of toxic compounds, was filmed in the area in 2022, and several local residents acted as extras. The irony of life imitating art is not lost on them; but others have taken the matter rather more literally. Premonitory events and activities – think Event 201, the pandemic simulation conducted before the Covid outbreak, or the exercises taking place immediately before the 7/7 bombings in London – form part of the core folklore that animates conspiracy theory.

And conspiracists point to the fact that these strange coincidences are not plucked from the depths of some fevered imagination; they really have happened and continue to happen. So if one's worldview is that there is no such thing as coincidence, that all events have a cause, and thus someone is responsible, and thus someone is to blame, the inadvertently prophetic movie was decidedly sinister. Someone in the know was delivering a coded warning; or alternatively, The Powers That Be were taunting us with hints of our dystopian future.

Others focused on the cargo of the ill-fated train. The rationale for this was clear: if Norfolk Southern was not to be trusted when it comes to safety, why should we take their word for what was on the train? Rumours circulated in the immediate aftermath of the controlled burn that trace amounts of phosgene, a nerve gas used in WWI as a chemical weapon, had been detected in the air and water around East Palestine.

This led to speculation that the cargo was not vinyl chloride, as stated by the authorities, but its much more virulent chemical cousin, vinylidene chloride, also known as dichloroethene, a compound used by Dow Chemicals, allegedly hiding behind a subsidiary named Spectrulte, to clean spent uranium rods at a giant reprocessing plant in Madison, Illinois, the location from which the cargo apparently originated.

The Madison plant has been the subject of controversy for years, not least because of concerns over the safety of its procedures for handling extremely hazardous waste; but some have gone further and suggested that Dow are secretly producing chemical weapons at the plant, in breach of international treaties banning such activity. Dichloroethene, it is claimed, is a precursor compound for the production of phosgene.

From here, it is only a small step to speculating that the train carried a cargo ultimately intended for export to Ukraine (or Poland, or Latvia, depending on one's geopolitical inclinations). The US government, that is, was planning to give Ukraine vast amounts of poison gas to use against the Russians; or, in more elaborate versions of the theory, to create a false flag event and blame the nasty Russians for using phosgene

on Ukrainians.

Another curious coincidence got the C-sphere thinking. Less than two weeks before the disaster, residents of East Palestine were chosen to pilot a medical ID scheme, *MyID*, to track health conditions and speed up medical responses to emergencies. Were they being lined up as guinea pigs for a callous experiment, where their inevitable deaths from the burgeoning disaster (all planned, obviously) could be digitally tracked and analysed in real time?

The most ingenious theorising managed to link the disaster to the Clinton Body Count, another hardy perennial of conspiracist ecology. Three weeks after the derailment, a small plane carrying five employees of CTEH, a science consulting company, crashed, killing all on board. Ostensibly, the crew were going to investigate a different disaster involving an explosion at a metal plant in Bedford, Ohio. But the plane took off from Little Rock airport in Arkansas; and Little Rock is Clinton country. For many in the C-sphere the airport's secret motto is: cocaine in, corpses out.

Coincidence clusters around tragedy like white blood cells around a wound; and the arcane, beguiling spoor of conspiracy hovers over events like a pall of baleful smoke.

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PSYCHIC SLEUTH SUCCESS?

A Spiritualist medium claims he helped find the body of missing Nicola Bulley



ABOVE LEFT: A team from Lancashire Police and a crew from Lancashire Fire and Rescue service search the River Wyre near the bench where Nicola Bulley's mobile phone was found. TOP RIGHT: Nicola Bulley in a photo shared by Lancashire Police. ABOVE RIGHT: Medium Jason Rothwell decided to use his gift to help find the missing woman.

When mortgage advisor Nicola Bulley went missing while walking her dog on the banks of the River Wyre in Lancashire on 27 January, police were initially baffled. She left her phone, still running a work Teams session, on a bench; her dog was nearby, and while investigations narrowed things down to a 10-minute period when something must have happened to Bulley, they could not find any obvious clues as to her fate. They assumed that she must have gone into the river as there was no evidence of her leaving the site in any other way.

Media scrutiny of the police investigation was intense, and their admission of a lack of any clues created an explosion of speculation on social media, particularly TikTok, that was followed by members of the public swarming the site to carry out their own searches. This led to YouTuber Dan Duffy getting arrested for public order offences and a large group of men from Liverpool being dispersed by police after they arrived to search a nearby abandoned house. Others turned up to dig holes in fields along the river and trespass in gardens to

rummage through sheds before police issued a dispersal order to prevent further undisciplined incursions.

Meanwhile, they accepted the offer of freelance search expert Peter Faulding, who used side scan sonar and other hi-tech tools to comb the river near where Bulley had vanished. Having said that he could find her "within an hour" he searched for three days, after which he said he did not believe Bulley was in the water and police largely stopped searching the river. This only fuelled online conspiracy theories, which were now claiming the disappearance was faked and that at least some of the people involved were "crisis actors", and that the whole thing was a performance intended to advance the "chipping agenda", by which the government would force everyone to have tracker implants, largely unnecessary as we voluntarily carry phones that track us anyway.

Then, on 19 February, police announced that two walkers had spotted the body of a blonde woman tangled in reeds about a mile downriver from

where Bulley disappeared and had called the police. They retrieved the remains, with press photographers recording the moment when the walkers pointed out their discovery. The body was later confirmed to be Bulley.

Shortly after, one of the walkers seen in the pictures, Jason Rothwell, 33, put out a statement confirming that he had assisted police and explaining that he had used his gifts as a psychic medium to locate the body saying, "I was not asked by the police or Nicola's family to become involved in this case, but having seen the wild speculation and hurtful commentary that has been ongoing... I decided to use whatever 'gift' it is we mediums possess to try and locate Nicola Bulley." He also claimed to have been involved in finding Michael Brooks, another missing person. He then added: "I will not be giving any further information or commentary at this time regarding the work involved in finding this person nor is it my place to engage in any discussion on how that body came to originally be in the water."

Rothwell thanked Lancashire Police for their "help, support and the open mindedness with which they dealt with us following our call. Spiritualists or mediums are obviously not something the police come across every day and I appreciate the respect given to us both." Police have not commented on Rothwell's statement, but various media outlets have confirmed that he is the person photographed at the site with police, while the search expert Peter Faulding said: "We weren't searching the reeds, our job was to search the water."

Mediums frequently offer their services to police, but they are never accepted, and while many go on to make pronouncements about cases, they are rarely even remotely relevant and often thoroughly misleading, so it is unusual for one to have been so accurate as to have been able to find the body when other search methods had failed. [telegraph.co.uk](https://www.telegraph.co.uk), [dailymail.co.uk](https://www.dailymail.co.uk), [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com), [theboltonnews.co.uk](https://www.theboltonnews.co.uk), 20 Feb; [mirror.co.uk](https://www.mirror.co.uk), 21 Feb; [lancashiretelegraph.co.uk](https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk), 22 Feb 2023.



FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

New oldest dog, döppelganger murder update and pussies in peril as the Phantom Cat Shaver returns

CAT SHAVER MYSTERY [FT414:4]



The UK seems to be in the grip of an outbreak of cat shaving, with “Phantom Cat Shavers” on the prowl in both Kent and Coventry. Coventry experienced a flurry of cat shaving in 2021, after which all went quiet, but the Shaver appears to have returned at the start of 2023, when a cat named Tallulah arrived home with the Shaver’s trademark perfect square cut into her stomach fur. “I thought maybe she licked the fur off her stomach or she had itchy skin,” said Tallulah’s owner, Bonnie Towe, “but once we lay her back we noticed it was quite a big patch and it was a perfectly cut square. It felt prickly like it had been shaved off. It had been done quite carefully as well, as her stomach didn’t look sore or cut.”

Meanwhile down in Kent, their Shaver is not so neat. A 10-year-old tabby cat belonging to Victoria Griffiths, 29, from Walderslade, came home with a large zig-zag pattern shaved into his back, while Kerry Ryan, 50, from Chatham found her cat Dennis had come home with an area around his back legs completely shaved. Other reports of cat shaving had also been made to police in the Medway towns in late 2022. In both areas the victims’ owners have expressed fears that the shaving may be a way of marking cats for future theft, but there is no evidence that previous shaving victims have been taken or come to any further harm. It would seem unlikely that anyone would go to the trouble of catching an animal to shave them, release them, and then have to capture them again to steal them. Previously, cat shavers have struck in Devon and in the Cotswolds, but police seem to have no leads on any of the perpetrators, and their motive remains obscure. *metro.co.uk*, 11 Jan, 8 Feb 2023.



TOP: Coventry resident Bonnie Towe’s cat Tallulah and her mysteriously shaved tummy. ABOVE: Shahraban K (left) and victim Khadija O.

DÖPPELGANGER KILLER [FT424:72]



Police investigating the murder of Algerian beauty blogger Khadija O, 23, in Ingolstadt, Bavaria, arrested Shahraban K (German police only identify people with their first name and an initial), a

23-year-old beautician, for her murder, along with an accomplice. Khadija’s corpse had been discovered in the back of Shahraban’s Mercedes with multiple stab wounds and looked so much like her alleged murderer that Shahraban’s own parents had identified the body as hers. Both had long black straight hair, similar complexions

and heavy makeup, making the two women “strikingly alike”, leading the German press to refer to the case as the “döppelganger murder”. It was only at autopsy that inconsistencies, such as different tattoos, revealed that the corpse was not Shahraban. The misidentification was assisted by Khadija having been killed by being stabbed in the face more than 50 times, completely disfiguring her. Police now believe that Shahraban killed her döppelganger as part of a plan to disappear. “Investigations have led us to assume that the accused wanted to go into hiding because of a family dispute and fake her own death to that effect,” said Veronika Grieser of the Ingolstadt state prosecutor’s office. In the weeks before the murder, Shahraban had contacted several people who closely resembled her on social media. “By making various promises she tried to bring about meetings, which was initially unsuccessful,” Grieser said. However, Shahraban and her accomplice eventually got Khadija to meet them with the promise of a cosmetics offer. They had then driven her to woodland, and, after she stepped out of the car, stabbed her to death. They then put the body in the back of the car and abandoned it in Ingolstadt, having left hints with Shahraban’s parents as to where she might be, so that they discovered the car with the body. “You don’t get a case like this every day, especially with such a spectacular twist,” said police spokesperson Andreas Aichele. “On the day we found the body there was nothing to prepare us for this development.”

It turns out that Shahraban K isn’t the only person recently who has tried to kill their döppelganger. Viktoria Nasyrova, a Russian woman living in New York, has been convicted of trying to kill her beautician, Olga Tsvyk, with a piece of poisoned cheesecake in 2016. Both are Russian speakers and looked



ABOVE: Thirty-year old Bobi is now the world's oldest dog and the oldest dog ever.

very much alike, with similar complexions and dark hair, and Nasyrova is believed to have been intending to steal Tsvyk's identity. She had gone to Tsvyk's house with a box of cheesecake which she shared, eating two pieces herself and giving a third, dosed with Phenazepam, a powerful sedative, to Tsvyk, who ate it, then vomited and staggered to her room to lie down. The next day, a friend found Tsvyk sprawled on her bed, unconscious and now dressed in lacy lingerie, with pills scattered across the floor, giving the impression of a suicide attempt. Taken to hospital, she survived, and on returning home she found her Ukrainian passport and US work permit were missing, as well as jewellery and about \$4,000 in cash. The trail of evidence led directly back to Nasyrova. It is thought that she was intending to assume Tsvyk's identity using the stolen documents, possibly to evade an Interpol red notice for her arrest issued in 2015, as she is believed to have murdered a neighbour in Russia, Alla Alekseenko, and stolen her life savings. She was also wanted by US police for allegedly drugging and robbing men she met on dating websites, and faces up to 25 years in prison for her attempt on Tsvyk's life. *theguardian.com*, 30 Jan 2022; *BBC News*, 10 Feb 2023.

OLDEST DOG [FT429:13]



After chihuahua Spike, 23, snatched the title of the world's oldest dog from mixed breed Gino, 22, in November, just a few days after Gino had been awarded the accolade, he did not have long to savour his triumph, as just two weeks later an even older dog took the crown.

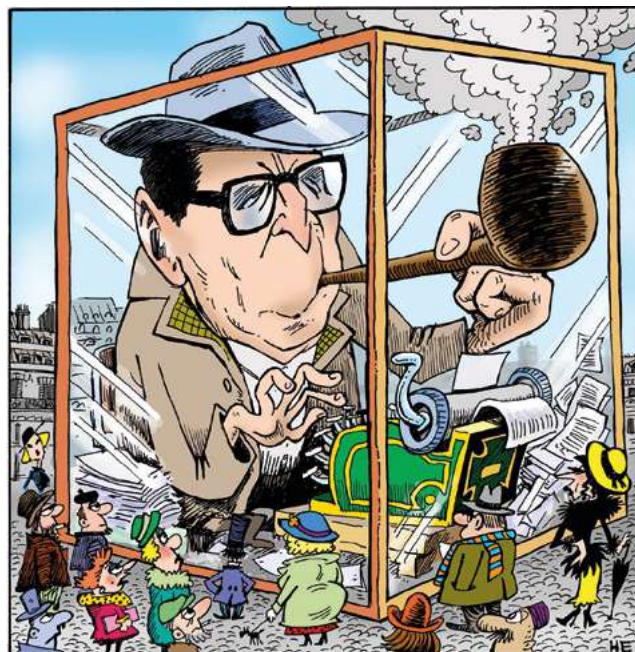
Bobi is a purebred Rafeiro do Alentejo, which is a breed of livestock guardian dog with an average life expectancy of 12-14 years, and lives on a farm in Portugal. Not only did he take the title of oldest living dog, but also that of oldest dog ever. At 30 years and 226 days old, he comfortably outstrips his predecessors in longevity and has also outlived Australian cattle dog Bluey (1910-1939), the previous oldest known dog, who was 29 years and five months old at his death in 1939.

Bobi's age is validated by the Portuguese government's pet database, and Leonel Costa, Bobi's owner, believes the secret to his longevity is the "calm, peaceful environment" he lives in. The dog has trouble walking and poor eyesight, but otherwise seems to have few health problems and could potentially live for several more years. *BBC News*, 3 Feb 2023.

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

267: SIMENON



The myth

Georges Simenon once wrote a novel from scratch in three days, sitting inside a glass cage, so that the whole of Paris could watch.

The "truth"

He didn't. He probably could've, but he didn't. Nonetheless, thousands of Parisians long remembered him doing it, and even today you can meet people whose grandparents claimed to have witnessed every semi-colon, every puff of the pipe. Simenon (1903-89), the Belgian creator of France's greatest detective, Jules Maigret, grew up obsessed with crime and with writing. Unusually, his books were admired by both readers and critics, and this despite his astonishing productivity: he wrote several hundred books, including at least 20 autobiographies, as well as journalism and scripts. Once, when another author's book was advertised as his first for three years, Simenon responded by boosting his own latest as "the first Simenon for eight days". In 1927 he agreed to a stunt designed by a daily paper: he would be locked in a glass cage for a week (three days and three nights, some sources say) and write a novel for serialisation in the paper, the characters and theme being chosen by readers' vote and revealed only as he entered the box. The paper went bust before the event could take place, but for the rest of his life, people would tell Simenon how well they remembered seeing him in that transparent cell, tap-tapping away at his typewriter. The power of PR, or an example of the 'Mandela Effect'?

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Mythchaser

Is it really true that 16 million people alive today are descended from Genghis Khan? This sensational headline has been popular knowledge for some time, but recent research seems to suggest that the Mongols as a group, rather than their leader as an individual, are responsible for the prolific Y chromosome in question.



NECROLOG

This month, we bid fond farewells to a rising star of British folklore taken before his time and to a prolific writer on Britain's Arthurian legends and landscapes

KAI ROBERTS

Folklore and the world of forteana lost a rising star with the untimely death of Kai Roberts following a short illness. He was the son of my friend and long-time *FT* contributor Andy Roberts. I first met Kai when he was just four years old at his home in Brighouse, West Yorkshire, where he continued to live with his mother Helen. In 1986 I had begun writing for the legendary *UFO Brigantia* magazine, edited at that time by Kai's father Andy. As we shared so many common interests in Earth Mysteries and ufology, we began writing and researching as a team. Working on book projects often entailed long and sometimes surreal field trips to investigate all forms of strange phenomena. Before he could walk, Kai was regularly dragged along on excursions to prehistoric monuments and haunted places in northern England; he joined us on visits to stone circles and expeditions hunting 'Celtic' stone heads, and as a teenager attended UFO, fortean and Earth Mysteries conferences. In a 2012 interview, Kai acknowledged his childhood immersion in "the weird" as the starting point for his fascination with British folklore, landscape and legends. Highly intelligent and well-read, Kai graduated with a degree in philosophy from the University of Edinburgh that honed the research skills he used in a series of books on ghosts and folklore around his beloved Pennine valley home. In his short but productive writing career he produced four titles, the first of which was *Grave Concerns: The Follies and Folklore of Robin Hood's Final Resting Place* (2011), a thorough and erudite examination of the many legends told about the outlaw's famous grave in Kirklees Park, near Huddersfield. Buoyed by the



ABOVE LEFT: Kai Roberts. ABOVE RIGHT: Geoffrey Ashe.

success of his first book, Kai went on to produce two local guides to supernatural legends, *Haunted Huddersfield* (2012) and *Haunted Halifax* (2014), and pulled together many strands of storytelling in his *Folklore of Yorkshire* (2013), tackling not only the ubiquitous Robin Hood legends but also witchcraft, dragons, phantom hounds, secret tunnels and calendar customs.

Aware that folklore is constantly evolving and has migrated from the written page to social media, Kai also collected material online. He launched an interactive blog (<https://lowercalderlegends.wordpress.com/>) that functions as "a compendium of hauntings, folk traditions, forteana and historical oddities" from the Lower Calder Valley, an area he felt had been neglected in earlier compilations. In 2014 he enjoyed a brief incumbency as editor of *Northern Earth* magazine and, at the time of his death, was working on a book about the folklore and mysteries of Ilkley Moor. He left several unpublished manuscripts.

In the 2012 interview Kai set out his attitude to folklore and supernatural phenomena. He felt that to write properly from a parapsychological perspective "you need to have a background

in psychology or the sciences". He said that his own academic background in philosophy led him to use the techniques of the folklorist, but he also found "the fortean approach much more honest and trustworthy, i.e. simply collecting reports of strange experiences and presenting them without too much comment for the audience to make their own judgement." Following the fortean tradition of benevolent scepticism, he was "happy to entertain many things as a cause of paranormal experiences, from reductive explanations such as infrasound, air pressure etc., to more outré theories like earth energies and 'the stone tape theory'." He didn't believe in ghosts in the traditional sense of 'spirits of the dead'. "Such a hypothesis would require I assent to both mind/body dualism and the existence of an afterlife, neither of which I find particularly credible. However, I believe that people have anomalous experiences, often induced by certain locations, which may be 'paranormal' in the sense that their cause lies beyond our current understanding of reality." These experiences, he continued, "are then interpreted through a body of motifs present in the collective psyche and turned

into 'ghost stories'. I prefer to remain in a state of what the poet John Keats called 'negative capability' about their potential causes, i.e. 'capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'."

Kai Roberts, author and folklorist; born West Yorkshire, 16 Nov 1982; died Huddersfield, 10 Dec 2023, aged 40.

David Clarke

GEOFFREY ASHE

For many people, their introduction to the historical evidence for King Arthur and Camelot came through one of Geoffrey Ashe's many books on the subject. The academic world did not entirely welcome Ashe's work, which was more speculative than many were comfortable with, but was, nonetheless, based on deep scholarship and an excellent understanding of its historical context. His first book on the subject, *King Arthur's Avalon: The Story of Glastonbury*, published in 1957, has sold more than 100,000 copies and has never been out of print. In this, Ashe put forward the case that Arthur and his wife Guinevere were buried at Glastonbury, which is the Avalon of legend, where the King's sword Excalibur was forged. He believed that the real Arthur was Riothamus, a fifth-century Romano-British military leader who fought against the Goths in continental Europe, and whom the historian Jordanes referred to as "king of the Britons" in the following century.

Ashe was one of the founders of the Camelot Research Committee that carried out a series of archaeological digs at Cadbury Castle, 20 miles (32km) from Glastonbury, and which he identified as the historical Camelot, supported by the names of local landmarks, the River Cam and the villages of West Camel



and Queen Camel. Building on the finds from these digs that showed that the prehistoric site had been refortified in what would have been Arthurian times, he wrote *Camelot and the Vision of Albion*.

Ashe was a prolific writer; following the success of *King Arthur's Avalon* he gave up his day jobs as a teacher and lecturer to write full time, producing a new book on average every two years for the next 60 years, many on Arthurian themes, but also including *St Brendan's Voyage to America*, which looked at the evidence for pre-Columbian discoveries of America by Europeans, and a biography of Gandhi, as well contributing to fortune classics such as the partwork *Man, Myth and Magic* and the *Reader's Digest* book *Folklore Myths and Legends of Britain*.

Ashe was born in Acton, west London, where his father ran a travel company. On the eve of WWII, his family emigrated to Canada, where he read English at the University of British Columbia and met his first wife, Irene, with whom he had five children. After Irene's death in 1991, he married Patricia Chandler, who survives him. The family returned to Britain after the war and Ashe then studied English at Trinity College, Cambridge, gaining a double first. In 1963 he was elected to the Royal Society of Literature; in 2012 was awarded an MBE and in 2015 he became an honorary freeman of Glastonbury. He lived there for many years adjacent to the Chalice Garden in Chalice Orchard, a house previously owned by the occultist Dion Fortune. There, he happily held court for the rest of his life, visited by everyone from Colin Wilson to senior bishops, frequently making media appearances to talk about his Arthurian research.

Geoffrey Thomas Leslie Ashe MBE FRSL, author; born Acton, London, 29 Mar 1923; died, Glastonbury 30 Jan 2022, aged 98.



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

CORVID COURTS

I wrote last month about the way that rooks are supposed to abandon rookeries before the death of the human owner (FT429:29). Another chapter in corvid forteana is the notion of the 'court'. A human witness watches as a group of corvids (usually rooks or crows) meet in a circle and then judge and kill one of their own.

Consider this vivid example from 1956 (thanks to Bob Skinner). Two men "saw scores of rooks converging from all quarters towards a large mound... Their full-voiced cries were unwontedly raucous, seeming to be evoked more by anger than by alarm, and their flights above the mound were erratic. Then suddenly, as if at a given signal, the noise stopped. The birds alighted in a large company on the grass at the foot of the mound and slowly, but with precision, formed themselves into an inner and an outer circle, leaving a solitary rook standing within the smaller one. The cawing started again... with no break in formation; then the inner circle began to quiver as a prelude to closing in on the rook in the centre. Before we realised what was happening the company broke up, took to wing and departed. On the ground was left the dead body of a rook".

I am struck by the sheer number of accounts like this. There are dozens: I know

as I've been collecting them... But I also wonder whether these memories are not, in part, human attempts to make sense of the alien world of birds. Rooks are naturally gregarious birds and there is a good chance that after a roosting (which sometimes involves thousands of birds) there is a dead rook left on the ground. Let me tell you a

story: i) countless rooks, ii) caw-cawing and iii) a dead bird. But then there are accounts that are more difficult to dismiss in this way. Take the following from 1880. A hiker in the Alps came upon a "small secluded glen, surrounded by thick cover, concealed in which he was enabled to contemplate a strange spectacle." There "sixty to seventy ravens had formed a circle round one of their fellows... Every now and then they interrupted their debates for a brief space to listen to the

energetic representations of the prisoner... Presently, having arrived at the unanimous conclusion that the arraigned bird had failed to exculpate itself, they suddenly flew upon him from all sides, and tore him to pieces." Ravens do not habitually meet in groups of "sixty to seventy". I am sure of the sincerity of the first witness and his rook court. I wonder about his interpretation. I have no idea what to make of an Alpine raven lynching. (For a magpie court, see FT257:77.)

Simon is co-presenter of the *Boggart and Banshee* podcast.

"THE COMPANY
BROKE UP, TOOK
TO WING AND
DEPARTED... ON
THE GROUND WAS
THE DEAD BODY
OF A ROOK"



Bizarre ballooney

NIGEL WATSON examines the fuss and the fall-out from the USA's Chinese balloon flap

It was like something out of a science fiction film when in early February 2023 TV news reported an unidentified aerial object flying over northern USA.

The Pentagon quickly stated that this was an "intelligence-gathering balloon, most certainly launched by the People's Republic of China." More worryingly, it was spotted over Montana where there is a base for 150 intercontinental ballistic missiles.

At first President Biden was advised not to shoot down the high-altitude balloon as the debris from it could pose a risk to those under its flightpath. The Chinese foreign ministry said it did not pose a threat and was merely a civilian weather airship that had limited steering capacity, causing it to deviate far from its planned route. Mao Ning, a spokesperson for the Chinese foreign ministry, said: "We hope the relevant parties will handle the matter in a cool-headed way." Ex-president Trump was far from cool-headed, his response on social media: "SHOOT DOWN THE BALLOON."

Contrary to the Chinese statements, the balloon had changed its course and was manoeuvrable. The view that it was an intelligence-gathering device prevailed and once the balloon was off the coast of South Carolina, it was shot down on 4 February.

A few days later there was a spate of UAPs. On 10 February, 1.45pm Washington time, an F-22 Raptor fighter which took off from Elmendorf Air Base near Anchorage used an AIM-9X Sidewinder heat-seeking missile to shoot one down over Deadhorse, Alaska. The pilot claimed the object was the size of a small car, unmanned and was travelling at an altitude of 40,000ft (12,200m). The next day, 11 February, another F-22 with the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), shot down an aerial object over Yukon, Canada, at 3.41pm EST. Canadian defence minister Anita Anand said it was cylindrical in shape, also flying at an altitude of 40,000ft.

On Sunday 12 February, two American F-16 fighter jets were sent to shoot down another UFO flying at a height of 20,000ft (6,100m). Both pilots had trouble describing what they saw. One said it: "Looks like something... there's some kind of object that's distended... it's hard to tell, it's pretty small." They estimated it was the size of a small car, and moving very slowly. These factors meant their first Sidewinder missile missed the target, and it was their second shot that brought it down over Lake Huron. Officials described it as an octagonal object with a tethered payload below it.

PREVIOUS INTRUSIONS

US officials said the balloon shot down over South Carolina was part of a fleet of intelligence-gathering balloons that had been used to spy on 40 countries on five continents. These types of vehicles had ventured over US airspace at least three times during Donald Trump's presidency, but the Pentagon claimed their capacity to collect data was no better than that of spy satellites. The Pentagon also confirmed that Chinese balloons had been seen over Hawaii and Guam in the past, and that dozens of Chinese spy balloons have intruded on Taiwanese airspace on a monthly basis in the past few years. Indeed, in January 2023, a US F-22 fighter jet shot down a balloon and its payload off the coast of Taiwan.

Not to be outdone, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said that since January 2022 the US had illegally sent 10 balloons over its territory.

UFOS OR BALLOONS?

The wreckage of the first Chinese balloon was recovered from the sea for further inspection, while the other three objects that were shot down did not seem to be part of the balloon fleet. As they fell on more remote territory, retrieving their wreckage posed a bigger challenge, and until this was done it was admitted they might not have been Chinese and could have originated from other nations, research institutions or civilian/commercial organisations. All of the objects were different in appearance.

The first balloon was detected eight days before it was shot down, indicating that the US authorities did not want to make this knowledge public, as it would have shown the Chinese the range and abilities of their detection systems. The smaller, slower moving 'UFO' craft might have normally gone undetected, but USAF and NORAD had recalibrated their radar systems to find smaller high-altitude objects.

NORAD commander General Glen VanHerck admitted they had a "domain awareness gap" that meant smaller and slower-moving aerial objects had slipped through their surveillance network. Bruce McClintock, the head of RAND Corporation's Space Enterprise Initiative, warned that: "The lower you tune down things to pick up smaller objects... the more likely you are to have these kinds of false alarms. It's not like any nation, including the United States, has unlimited bandwidth to look for these objects. They have to make decisions about where to focus their sensors."

DISCLOSURE

On 16 February, President Biden gave a 10-minute public address about the matter, but did not disclose anything we did not already know. He confirmed that they regarded the first balloon as a Chinese spying device, and the other three balloons were probably sent aloft by "private companies, recreation or research institutions". He went on to say that for this reason, "I've directed my team to come back to me with sharper rules for how we will deal with these unidentified objects moving forward, distinguishing between those that are likely to pose safety and security risks that necessitate action and those that do not." The review of how to react to future UAPs will be classified, as "we don't give a road map to our enemies to try to evade our defences," Biden said.

ALIENS?

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said, on 13 February, in response to many questions, that "there is no indication of aliens or extraterrestrial activity with these recent takedowns."

On social media, even UFO believers agreed with the White House. As one put it: "A UFO would never allow a jet to fire at them. They would, as in the past, kill the jet's engines and it would fall to the ground... the pilot would either die, or hit eject with his parachute and float to the ground hopefully unhurt. There's no way those balloons could have been mistaken for UFOs." Others also stated that 'real' UFOs defy physics and can move quicker than the human eye, so man-made weapons would never be able to take one down. This led to the conclusion that this was "clearly a psy-op" or even a "back-engineered job".

Daniel Scranton, channelling the 'Arcturian Council', got this message: "Now, we want you to all understand that your skies are filled with spaceships from all across the galaxy and from other dimensions, and we also want you all to rest assured that no one has shot down a spaceship. Something being a UFO does not make it a spaceship. These were all human-made crafts that were shot down."

However, the Arcturian Council did say that this should help prepare us for when they *do* actually land here in their spacecraft.

DISTRACTIONS

More sensible commentators voiced the opinion that the balloon sightings are a



LEFT: US Navy personnel recover a high-altitude balloon shot down over the Atlantic Ocean.

smokescreen. Dr Binoy Kampmark, who lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, was strident in his opinion that: "This absurd spectacle has become the stuff of political bricks and straw for a Biden administration keen to push its stuttering election cart. Embroiled in his own classified documents scandal, President Joe Biden was put off his stroke about focusing on any announcement about running for a second term. Burnishing the China Threat was just the ticket." There is considerable debate about other reasons for this being used as a distraction from political and social issues, plus theories that the spy balloon was really being used to survey the location of oil resources in the Arctic region.

WE TOLD YOU SO

UFO sceptic Mike West does not rule out aliens completely, but thinks the military should focus on the threat of enemy terrestrial UAPs. He notes how easy it is to misidentify balloons and states: "This is probably going to be a good clarifying moment in UFO history, realising that balloons are responsible for a lot of UFO sightings. Certainly there are a lot of videos I see that end up being things like balloons..."

One UFO proponent said this was clearly a "catastrophic failure of intelligence", while Luis Elizondo (of ATTIP fame) said that it was "the consequence of not properly handling airspace threats." Republican Senator Marco Rubio said the public now knows what has been happening for years: "This is why I pushed to take this seriously and created a permanent UAP task force two years ago."

What these UAP supporters have tended to avoid admitting is that they campaigned to investigate fast-flying craft with supernatural powers, or high-tech UAPs, not slow moving low-tech balloons. They screamed "aliens", not "balloons", but I'm sure they will tell us more about their heroics in future TV documentaries.

A SOCIAL PANIC?

This balloon scare is a good wake-up call for better use of detecting, tracking and dealing

with enemy or suspect terrestrial UAPs.

In a similar fashion, when Winston Churchill was First Lord of the Admiralty in 1912 he made use of sightings of a phantom airship over Sheerness to instigate tighter Aerial Navigation laws and to prepare British defences against potential aerial threats (see **FT372:36-37**).

Sociologist (and occasional FT contributor) Robert Bartholomew noted: "This episode has all of the ingredients of a social panic in the making: a foreign adversary, political tension and mistrust, intense publicity, and a jittery public. Combined with the unreliability of human perception, it may just be a matter of time before we experience a wave of sightings."

The Sheerness sightings and the publicity about them triggered a wave of phantom airship sightings throughout Britain in 1913. Historian Brett Holman, interviewed in an article "Lessons from the Phantom Airship Panic of 1913", points out the many similarities between these scares, except that the phantom airships were regarded as a high-tech weapon seen by ordinary people, whereas the latest balloons are extremely low-tech and mainly detected by radar or pilots. Whatever the differences, Holman regards the sky as the major factor: it's where people fear an enemy (terrestrial or extraterrestrial) can deploy its technology.

Through our knowledge of such scares, we know that this heightened awareness is likely to trigger more sightings and false alarms. One example was the detection over southeast Romania on 14 February of an object floating at an altitude of 36,000ft (11,000m). The Romanian Air Force quickly scrambled two MiG 21 Lancer jets to the scene but they were unable to find the object. On the same day, Moldova closed its airspace for more than three hours. This was due to what Foreign Ministry spokesman Daniel Voda described as an "object similar to a weather balloon" being detected near the Ukrainian border. This came at a time when tensions in the area had risen due to Russian missiles directed at the Ukraine flying over their territory.

IMPLICATIONS

All this publicity has highlighted the fact that balloons and similar aerial objects are incredibly elusive, and even when they are detected by radar, pilots who are scrambled to intercept them find it hard to see or describe them in any detail.

As David Clarke shows in his blog entry "UFOs and balloons: A Secret History", there are numerous instances of balloons sighted by military pilots in the Cold War era that were shrugged off as 'flying saucers' to hide secret military projects. I'm sure trawling through the files would reveal plenty more classic sightings that can be explained in a similar fashion.

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HEOL FANOG

WHAT LIES BENEATH?

The remote Welsh farmhouse of Heol Fanog might be considered the most haunted house in Britain thanks to its exposure in 'The Witch House', a recent Radio 4 podcast series. But could there be rational explanations for the terrifying phenomena that plagued the Rich family? Psychologist **DR CIARÁN O'KEEFE** takes a sceptical look at the case.

"I LOOKED UP AND A FIGURE WAS LOOKING DOWN AT ME. HER FACE WAS BLANK, BUT SHE WAS LOOKING AT ME. THERE WAS NO EXPRESSION..." LIZ RICH

Imagine seeing this apparition in *any* context. How would you feel? Now imagine you are walking up your drive, pushing your baby in a pram, and the figure is looking down at you from the empty nursery. How would you feel? Now imagine this incident comes after months of unexplained phenomena including phantom footsteps, noxious smells, loud banging noises, electrical disturbances and possible demonic possession. How would you feel? Now imagine you live in a remote old farmhouse deep in the Welsh countryside and you are on your own. How would you feel? Later, you walk into the nursery and see the same woman sitting there and realise she looks like a former resident who died 10 years earlier. How would you feel?

This is a haunting case from 1989. It's set in the shadow of Pen y Fan, in Brecon Beacons National Park, the highest peak in South Wales. Just to the north, on the way to the town of Brecon, is Heol Fanog, a remote farmhouse more commonly known in the media as "Hellfire Farm", or even "The Welsh Amityville". Recently, due to a popular BBC Radio 4 podcast by Danny Robins (of *Uncanny* fame), it is now also referred



ABOVE: Danny Robins with Liz Rich today, some 30 years after the events at 'The Witch Farm'.



COURTESY LIZ RICH

ABOVE: Heol Fanog at the time of the Rich family's tenancy, complete with goat. BELOW: Bill and Liz Rich with baby Ben, born on 28 October 1989.

to as "The Witch Farm". When you first hear the eyewitness accounts from the Rich family at the centre of this case, all of these colourful labels make sense. In fact, if we take the reported paranormal phenomena at face value, Heol Fanog certainly has the potential to be the UK's 'Most Haunted House'. But that's if you believe in ghosts and haunting experiences. If you're a sceptic, like me, then this case instead has the potential to be the 'Most Complex Paranormal Whodunnit'.

THE WITCH FARM

In May 1989, young, pregnant Liz and her successful partner, Bill Rich, rent an isolated farmhouse in the beautiful but remote Welsh countryside, with Laurence, Bill's teenage son from a previous marriage. They're hoping for a fresh start, a rustic idyll; but Heol Fanog, as the ancient stone building is known, holds dark secrets, and the family's new life will become a terrifying ordeal that will change them forever.

It all starts with some footsteps on the landing heard late one night in November. The next day, events take a turn toward something more tangible, more modern: an electricity bill – an outlandishly, impossibly huge one. Something, it seems, is drawing the power from the house. But as Liz and Bill try to investigate, other strange things happen – phantom footsteps are heard coming down the stairs, stopping as if realising there are people downstairs,

IT ALL STARTS WITH SOME FOOTSTEPS ON THE LANDING LATE ONE NIGHT

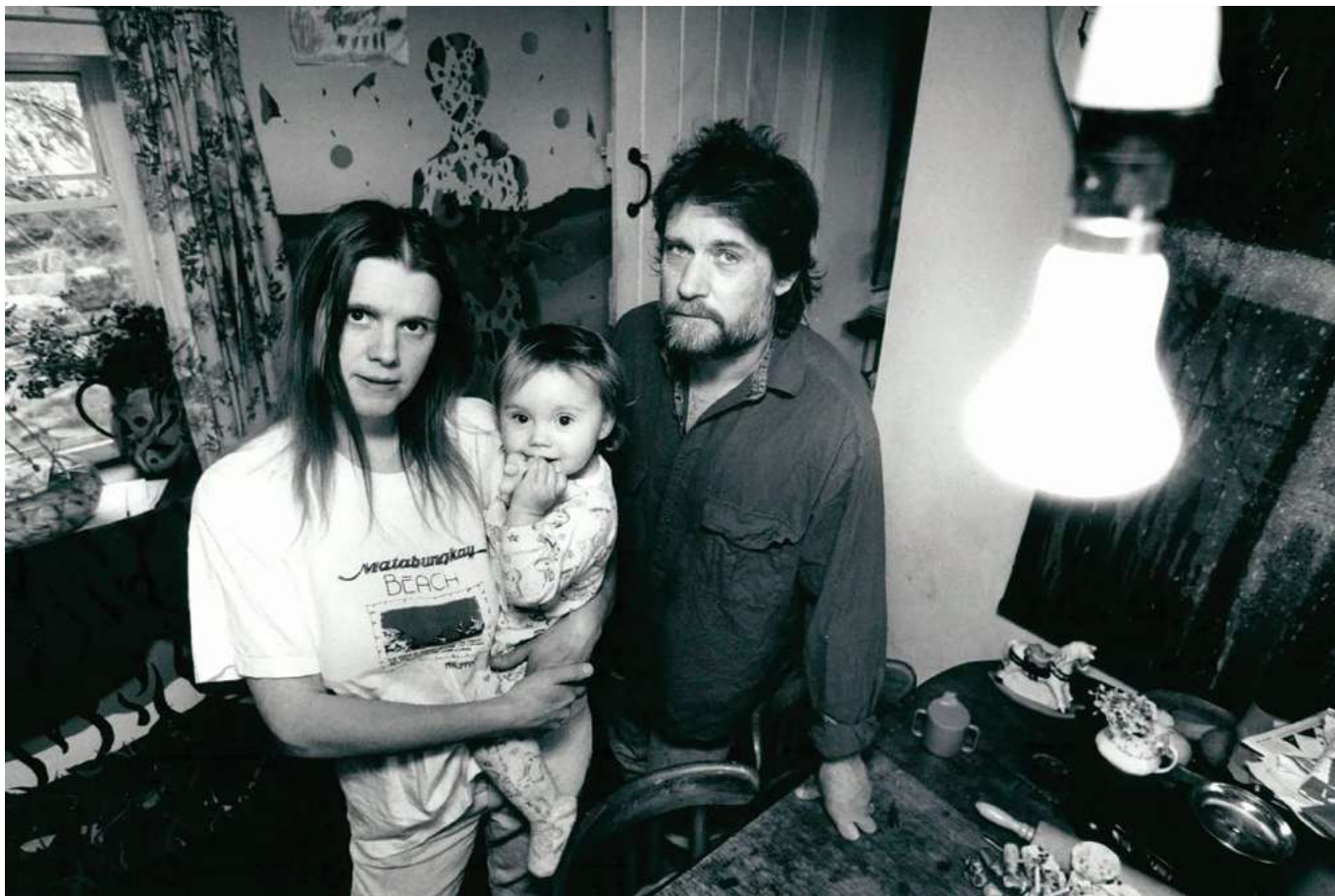


THE SNORING UNDER THE BED

"I'd been hearing the snoring, breathing, under the bed for a week, and I thought it was Doris the cat. Well, I mean, it was the most obvious thing to think about. One night I was sick of this stupid cat, so I just got the pillow and sort of threw it under the bed to drive the cat out. But there was no cat under there. I looked. But the snoring was still snoring. But there was nothing under the bed. At which point I screamed for Bill, and he came in and stood by the window at the foot of the bed and the snoring went under his feet. So he was standing in the snoring. And the snoring was like a tiger snoring. It was a loud snoring, like a sleeping tiger. It followed him..." **Liz Rich**

then turning to go back up again. Freezing cold spots are felt before heat invades the house; the sound of snoring is heard in an empty room; Bill's art commissions dry-up; the farm animals die mysteriously, one by one; and the family feels a sinister presence in the house that seems to affect them

COURTESY LIZ RICH



COURTESY LIZ RICH

ABOVE: Bill and Liz with young Tomas at Heol Fanog in 1995. BELOW: Ben and Rebecca in the children's bedroom.

all in different ways. Laurence becomes increasingly moody and withdrawn, and Bill's paintings, previously bright, colourful and in demand from buyers, change, as he obsessively works in his studio, painting dark, unsettling images that disturb Liz. And then, there are the ghosts. Frightening apparitions appear – an old woman in the children's room, a hooded figure by Liz and Bill's bed and a young man with an injured face. The old house may be lonely, but the Riches have the constant feeling that they are not alone.

Terrified, and with no one they can turn to in this insular community of isolated farms run by the same families for generations, Liz and Bill contact many paranormal experts – dowsers, mediums, exorcists, ghost-hunters – hoping to find some peace, or at least some help from people who can use their expert techniques to solve the case. They approach ghost-hunter and medium, Eddie Burks. Eddie, in his late-60s, is an old school paranormal investigator – a civil engineer by trade, with reputed psychic abilities. He has achieved an odd sort of fame after he was hired by the Queen's bankers, Coutts, to exorcise a ghost from their bank vaults; but as he arrives at Heol Fanog, he faces his toughest case yet...

Rumours abound that the house is cursed, that it was the meeting place for a witches' coven, that there was a murder here. Whatever the truth, the family are clearly living

THE HOUSE MAY BE LONELY, BUT THE RICHES HAVE THE FEELING THAT THEY ARE NOT ALONE



in fear, a deep daily terror that is taking its toll on them. Eddie and the other experts face a race against time to work out what is going on. Eddie is joined at the house by local Baptist minister David Holmwood, who

is convinced that demonic forces are at work and determines to exorcise the house.

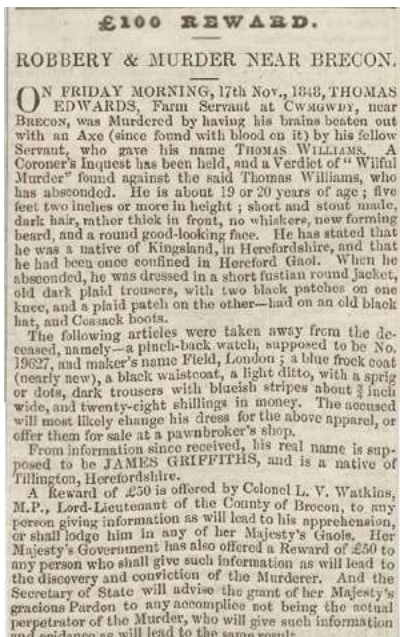
As Eddie investigates and Bill prepares to fight demons, Liz and Bill are at the centre of a terrifying situation: Heol Fanog, their rural idyll, has become a haunted nightmare. See the timeline on pages 38-39 for a full sequence of events in the case.

SENSORY OVERLOAD

My starting point, with any case, is always to try and define what it is we are tackling. This is described as a haunting case, so let's define what that means. A haunting experience is: "A sensory experience in which there appears to be present a person or animal (deceased or living) who is in fact out of sensory range of the experient..." (Michael A Thalbourne, *A Glossary of Terms Used in Parapsychology*, 1982).

Throughout the Heol Fanog case we are presented with some fascinating examples of sensory experiences. Indeed, it's the sheer variety of sensory experiences that makes this case stand out from the majority of hauntings where there may be a focus on only one or two senses, typically visual and/or auditory. Here we have witnesses reporting almost *every* kind of sensory experience. We have the hearing of seemingly inexplicable sounds – whether it is the phantom footsteps that initiated the case in November 1989, or piano notes floating down to Liz to entice her to investigate, or the horrific

COURTESY LIZ RICH



ABOVE LEFT: A contemporary report of the 1848 murder of Thomas Edwards. ABOVE RIGHT: Danny Robins (right) with Brecon historian Mike Williams at Edwards's grave.

deep breathing under the bed at night – perceptible sounds that on occasion are heard by multiple witnesses. There are also the thermosensory phenomena, the sensing of unnatural heat and cold. These temperature anomalies provide head-scratching moments that deviate from the typical cold spots so often reported in haunting cases. There is related tangible, objective evidence from the electricity board, who confirmed the inordinate electricity usage. The bills were astronomical, and would equate today to thousands of pounds a quarter. Early on in the case the key witnesses focused on the electricity meter as representing, and perhaps being a symptom of, a fundamental, darker problem that plagued the farmhouse for a full six years. In this instance here we are *not* dealing with subjective personal experience that could be easily explained away. The inexplicable electricity usage was investigated by others who were bewildered at not finding an answer. There was another objective witness to apparent phenomena when the local vet confirmed the deaths and illnesses of animals as a mysterious blight hit the surrounding area in early 1990.

We have the eyewitness accounts concerning apparitions – hundreds of them – everything from fleeting figures in the trees to a seven-foot (2m) tall silhouette akin to the Egyptian deity Horus (complete with falcon head). The olfactory sense is stimulated by a sulphurous smell that causes the witnesses to recoil; a noxious odour that is countered by the spontaneous intrusion of incense, which continues for days.

There is also the core sense of a presence, an evil undertone, that permeates the six-year duration of the case, something lying dormant that surfaces threateningly in various forms, as described by the colourful array of 'paranormal experts' who visit Heol Fanog. These characters add further com-

THE THING IN THE BARN

"I came in from the barn. It was coming through the horrible passageway. It was very tall. Solid, black. I don't know why I know it was a male. But it gave off that impression. It didn't seem to have a face. This isn't a person. This is a male, like dark shadowed thing. And it wasn't in a rush. There was no panic about it. It was walking from left to right. It didn't have a face." Liz Rich

plexity and intrigue as they offer their own answers to the Witch Farm whodunnit. Many, however, seem to make matters worse, exacerbating an already tense and distressing atmosphere. We are introduced to mediums, exorcists, dowsers, priests, ministers, local historians, journalists and ghosthunters. All hope to offer contact with the spiritual 'suspect' or to provide some sort of solution to the case, especially given the incessant and traumatic nature of the phenomena that plague the family.

And then there's the Rich family themselves. Bill and Liz, who marry in September 1989; Laurence (14 years old in 1989), Bill's son from a previous marriage; and Ben (born in 1989); Rebecca (born in 1990); and Tomas (born in 1994).

The complexity of the case, with its sheer volume of phenomena and large cast of characters, makes it far from easy to tackle. It offers fertile ground for the trainee investigator or parapsychologist seeking to test his or her knowledge of both sides of the debate: natural or supernatural? The supernatural can become an illusory distraction

from the natural. However, this implies that the normal explanations are simple – and yet their complexity is equally distracting. It is, however, a haunting case.

In complex cases, a single paranormal explanation would typically provide a beguilingly simple basis to account for all the phenomena. But to say "it is a ghost" in this case does not capture the intensity, volume or diversity of the phenomena experienced by the family. This is truly a paranormal whodunnit, so let us look at the suspects and find out what lies beneath the haunting at Heol Fanog.

MURDER

If the *violent* phenomena plaguing the Rich family is the clue then perhaps we need to look at violent incidents in the area. Locals refuse to cross an old bridge nearby because of a past murder, fearful of reprisals from the ghostly victim. A farmer at Blaen Gwdi, a neighbouring farm, was murdered by his wife, though she blamed a farmworker who was hanged for his apparent crime. The most significant incident happened in 1848, when James Griffiths (18) bludgeoned fellow farm servant Thomas Edwards (23) to death with an axe and buried him in a muck heap at Cwm Gwdi, another nearby farm. It was a well-known crime in the local area, and many local historians researched the case, though debate continued as to why it happened. Some theories suggested money as a motivation, others point to an argument over the farmer's daughter, with whom both men were in love. Griffiths was hanged in Brecon for the murder in 1849 and buried in a local churchyard. Despite the body being found in the neighbouring farm, Bill Rich was told the murder had actually happened in the garden of Heol Fanog. All the information about the Griffiths murder was confirmed by medium Eddie Burks, a



ABOVE LEFT: 'Endgame', one of Bill's paintings. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Bill and Liz's daughter Becca today, with some of her late father's artworks. **BELOW:** Plans of Heol Fanog drawn by Liz, showing the ground floor, with the location of the infamous electric meter in the barn, and the first floor, with the room where the old woman appeared.

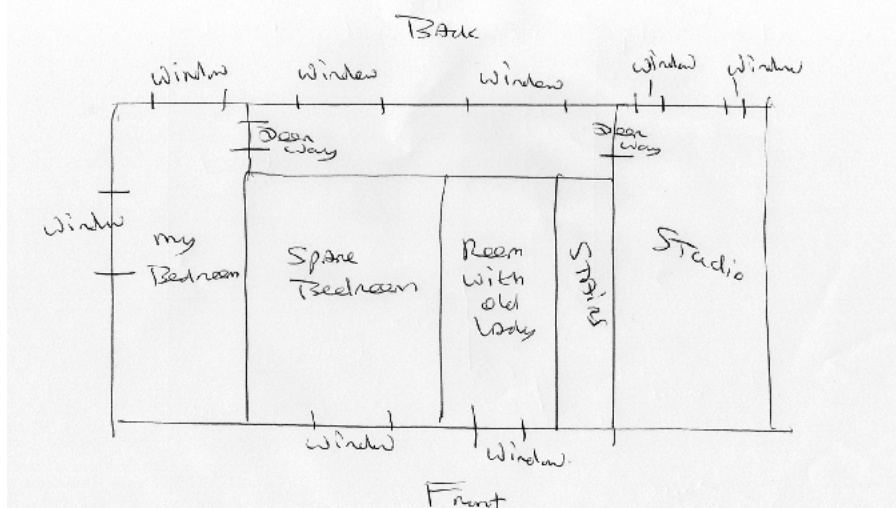
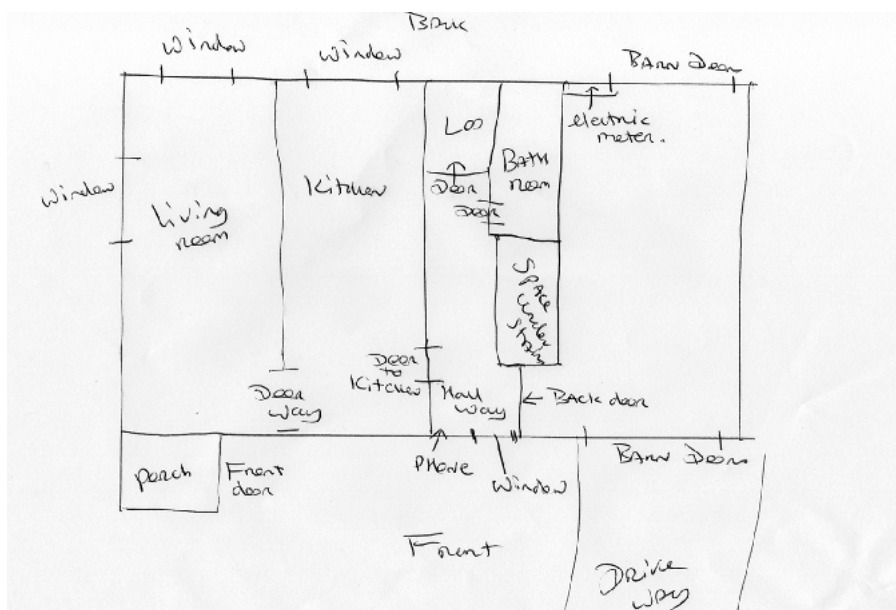
renowned “Ghostbuster” at the time (see **FT69:16**) who reported feeling the pain on his head caused by the axe blows.

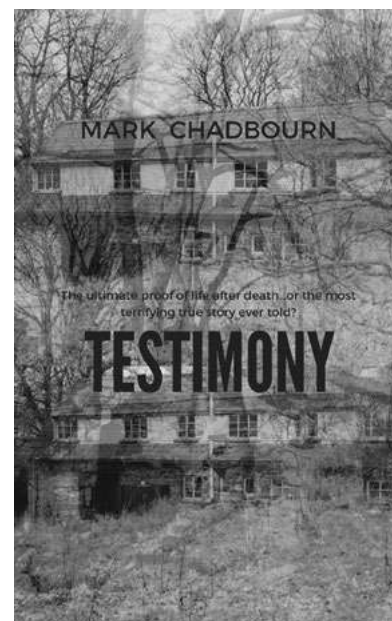
A VISIT TO EGYPT

An apparition witnessed by Bill and Liz might hold the key to the cause of the hauntings. It was a tall, dark, shadowy evil presence with a falcon-type head – a perfect description of the Egyptian god Horus. A few years before moving to Heol Fanog, Bill, Liz and Laurence had visited Egypt. It should have been a lovely family holiday, but it turned into a nightmare when they visited the Pyramid of Cheops. Liz witnessed bizarre light phenomena, and then all three felt the “presence” of something evil... something that made them feel ill and that forced them to leave. Could this negative experience have any link to the phenomena experienced at the ‘Witch Farm’ several years later? There was also an incident involving an Egyptian amulet, although Liz hadn’t bought anything of that nature on their visit. Was something lying dormant in the pyramid stirred up and brought back with the Rich family to South Wales?

WITCHES AND HEADHUNTERS

There is a long, well-established tradition of witchcraft in the Brecon area. Mark Chadbourn, in his fascinating 1996 book about the case, *Testimony* (now republished by Emerald Eye), spoke to anthropologist Dr Gil August, who confirmed the presence of many covens in the area dating back to the Middle Ages. But she elaborated, clarifying what these individuals would have been: "It's hard to follow up rumours of covens today because they are flimsy and almost verging on urban legends. Whenever





ABOVE LEFT: Psychic and paranormal investigator Eddie Burks at Heol Fanog. ABOVE RIGHT: *Testimony*, Mark Chadbourn's 1996 book about the Heol Fanog case, for which he interviewed numerous witnesses, including Bill and Liz, a previous occupant of the house and many others.

something strange happens, they [Baptists, Methodists] always say there must have been witches involved. What they are really talking about are Satanists. Satanists are not witches. Satanists are Christians because Satan is a Christian concept. Witches weren't evil. To an actual practising witch, life was precious, because it was a religion linked to nature and the cycles of nature."

While there is a colourful history of witchcraft in the area, of more significance is Bill's own foray into the craft. Back in the 1960s he became an "initiate", an individual with a desire to become a witch. He actually participated in an initiation ritual conducted by Alex and Maxine Sanders, the so-called 'King and Queen of the Witches' (FT403:32-39). Maxine recalls the incident to this day, as Bill walked out of the ceremony before it concluded. Could Bill's early belief in witchcraft have influenced the energies at work on the farm? Bill would have had an understanding of the impact of leaving an initiation ceremony, so could this have been an early traumatic experience in which he opened his mind, or a portal, to possibly dark spiritual influences?

Bill served briefly in the Navy when he was younger. He went AWOL and escaped to Borneo where he lived with the Iban people, a native tribe of headhunters, for several weeks. As a sign of masculinity, members of the tribe would collect severed heads from the enemy (either from warring factions or in the targeted expansion of their territory) and bring them back to the village. Despite headhunting gradually fading over the years, there were still pockets of the practice, though on a smaller scale. Whether Bill witnessed any such incidents or not, he would have been fully immersed in other rituals and religious practices of the tribe. 'Penga-

THE PENDANT

"We were staying down at Mum's again and in the living room was a kind of circle table and underneath it, mum found this pendant, like a necklace pendant without the chain – ancient looking thing – and she said, oh, is this yours? I said, No, never seen it before. It wasn't hers because she didn't wear stuff like that. It wasn't my father's, it wasn't the kids', obviously it wasn't Bill's. It did look Egyptian, but even when I was in Egypt, I didn't buy anything like that. Never seen it before... And I thought, oh, my God, you know, the thing's following us here now. And I thought I was safe in Mum's, and then this pendant appears out of nowhere. I was very frightened about it. The thought that this thing could follow us." Liz Rich

rap Iban' is the religious system practised by the Iban and it incorporates categories of powerful gods (creator gods, principal gods and mythic spirit heroes). A significant part of the worship is recognising that these gods and heroes make their presence known through dreams and as auguries in bird form, divination derived from the observation and interpretation of bird behaviour, especially abnormal behaviour. Additionally, anthropological research regarding Iban divination has revealed how it could also

be achieved through simple solitude. Could Bill's immersion in tribal ritual and religious practices have made him susceptible to the influence of mythic encounters?

NATURAL OR SUPERNATURAL?

In addition to being a paranormal whodunnit, the Heol Fanog case is also simply a who (or what) dunnet, a search for a rational explanation for all the strange events. But trying to provide an explanation of equivalent simplicity as "it is a ghost" when looking at the possible non-supernatural explanations is impossible. 'Normal' explanations certainly exist and offer useful – and from my perspective, convincing – arguments of something natural rather than supernatural at work. Sometimes, though, the complexity of such explanations can make the simpler 'paranormal suspect' seem more attractive. For example, the sulphurous smell reported by the Rich family could be the presence of "something evil". Or, it could be a smell indicative of sewer gas found in drainpipes or toilets, a build-up of mould and mildew in washing machines, rotten eggs or bad well water. When we consider "sulphur" as a smell, we are really talking about sulphur compounds (typically hydrogen sulphide) that cause unpleasant odours. Regardless of the origin of these compounds, even in safe concentrations they can smell terrible, even overwhelming; in higher concentrations, they can be potentially lethal as they deactivate an individual's ability to smell. However, this is only one interpretation of the reported smells.

One of my favourite words is relevant here – *phantosmia* (smelling things that aren't there), with *cacosmia* being unpleasant phantosmia. With phantosmia comes a long list of potential neurological, medical, psychiatric



ABOVE LEFT: Liz Rich in 1995 with the electric meter that ran up enormous bills and was repeatedly investigated by the local electricity board, who could find nothing wrong with it. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Liz Rich today. She and Bill divorced in 2005, and he died in 2016.

and environmental causes. Therein lies the problem – it is easier for us as human beings to conceptualise the simplest, all-encompassing explanation – that an evil presence plagued the tenants of Heol Fanog – than to tackle a number of complex natural explanations for each separate reported phenomenon. Think of the suggested explanations given for the sulphur smell, and then think of a similar list of possible explanations for every phenomenon reported over the six years of the Heol Fanog haunting. It would be impossible for a sceptic such as myself to compete against the single and simple supernatural explanation of an evil, dark presence rooted in the location, history and the people involved, unless I could group everything together into one simple, but perfectly natural, argument.

SOLUTIONS

A simple “solution” to the Heol Fanog haunting is tough to arrive at, as the case is a complex interplay throughout between environment and psychology. The environmental stuff includes the topography and isolation of the house, but also key events like Chernobyl and an earthquake less than a mile away in 1992. Remember the devastating blight that hit the animals in the midst of this case? It is not always remembered today, but Welsh farms suffered significantly as a result of the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. Over 4,000 Welsh farms at the time were affected and placed under strict radiation monitoring restrictions. In the late 1980s/early 1990s, at its peak, over 23,000 sheep failed the radioactive tests and there were reports of deformed births, illness and deaths. The perceived mysterious blight hitting the local animals would

THE HORSE PAINTING

“So they had this horse over there that she was very fond of and she commissioned Bill to do a painting of this horse. He went over there to see the horse and was well chuffed to make a bit of money out of this. You know, he’d show me the sketches and it was coming along very, very well. But he couldn’t get this one leg right. He got the whole horse right. It was good. It was great. He could not get the back leg right. It just wouldn’t go how he wanted it and he showed me. It was weird. It didn’t look right. Anyway, he did it in the end. It still wasn’t right. But he figured he’d got it right as much as he could.

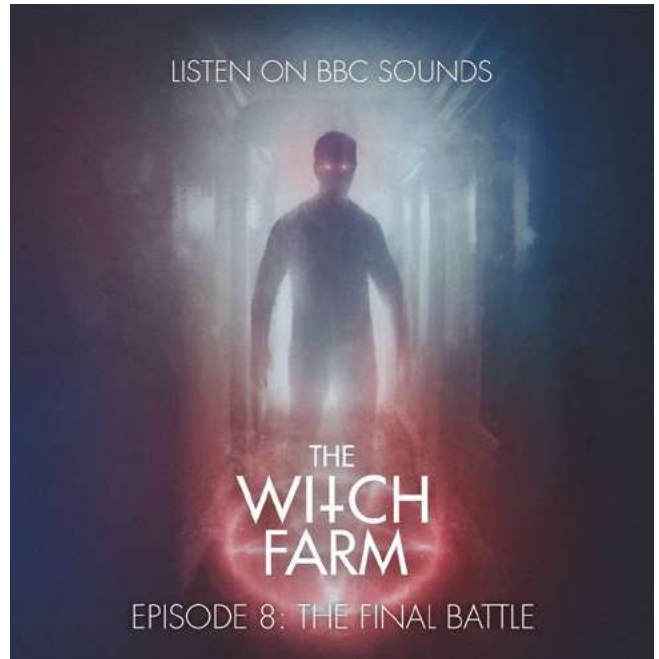
That horse actually broke its leg and it was the leg that Bill couldn’t paint right. And they had to have the horse put down. And they obviously knew about the troubles we were having over here, and they didn’t speak to Bill from that day on. I think they burnt the picture. .

The horse died on the exact place where Bill had used the scenery in the background. He had chosen this particular backdrop of the field to the left of the house and the mountain area behind.” Liz Rich

have exacerbated already existing psychological factors, such as an interplay between stress, fear and lack of sleep. That’s before one even considers any “fantasy proneness”, a personality trait that correlates highly with anomalous experiences. There’s also the very real potential for paracosmic fantasy, where the experient becomes wholly immersed in a fantasy world. To all of this, we can add the stress due to specific family dynamics at work.

However, all of the above can seem frustratingly non-committal, because there’s no single explanation. An alternative would be to focus on the teenage Laurence. Neither Bill nor Liz seem to have tracked his behaviour during the initial months at Heol Fanog: could he have been responsible for the footsteps heard late that first night and for other phenomena (bangs, knocks) without having realised it? Could some of those initial phenomena inadvertently caused by Laurence have been what prompted Liz’s subsequent fear?

Many of the aforementioned paranormal elements might instead place Bill as a prime natural suspect. His experience abroad with tribal cultures could be a normal trigger. His unique experiences with the Iban and his dabbling in witchcraft add a complex depth to his psychology and were potentially traumatic experiences that may have stayed with him, unresolved. They may have preyed on his mind, making mundane experiences (like mysterious footsteps) mix with the isolation, loss of work and financial worries at Heol Fanog to produce the feeling of an overarching curse or evil presence, a paranoid interpretation fuelled by seemingly inexplicable negative incidents. This is a concept and interpretation not out of place



ABOVE LEFT: Adam Leese as Bill Rich in a dramatisation of the case for the 'Hellfire Farm' episode of Channel 4's *True Horror* series in 2018. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The Heol Fanog case captured the nation's imagination as 'The Witch Farm' in Danny Robins's BBC Radio 4 podcast, which told the story in eight episodes.

in cultures with the superstitious thinking (of, for example, some tribes in Borneo).

If you are frustrated by a non-committal solution for the case and want an answer, you could force me into a darkened basement corner near a malfunctioning electricity meter and I might give you a simple one. You need look no further than the wonderment of the word *psychology* and the impact it had on the main protagonists in the case. Bill, for example, sought escape through alcohol, which ultimately resulted in the breakdown of his marriage to Liz and his early death.

Heol Fanog, then, presents itself as a perfect haunting: but if there are any genuinely paranormal phenomena involved in the case, they act as smoke and mirrors, hiding the power of psychology that lies beneath – beneath the building, the environment, the witnesses, the relationships, the family dynamics, the experts, the history and ultimately the phenomena themselves.

POSTSCRIPT

Danny Robins, the writer and presenter of the Uncanny podcast "The Witch Farm", received an email in late 2022 from the house's current owner:

"Dear Danny,

"Congratulations on The Witch Farm.

"I'm contacting you as Heol Fanog has been home for my family for the last 25 years.

"If there is anything mysterious going on here today it is the gentle mystery of nature. For a quarter of a century, the land around the converted barn has been managed for wildlife, for family get-togethers and as productive, organic gardens.

"If a visitor encounters a cloud of flies at the gate, it's part of the web of insect life

THE ENERGY OF HEOL FANOG

"If we liken this energy then to a human being, who was out to sort of... Yeah, it would have the energy of an abuser. Because they start gently, and they are very nice in the beginning. You know, actually, very, very nice people usually, and it's gradual, it's slow, until they have complete and utter control. And the one who is being abused can't even leave the house. Because they won't allow it. And they won't allow help to come in. And if the one who's being abused tries to get back at the abuser, the abuse will become worse. Much worse. To try and teach the one that they mustn't do that. And this is kind of like how this energy worked because if we sought help, it was clever, it would retreat. But it would come back with a vengeance and it would follow the one who'd helped and play hell in their house. And it did do that many times."

Liz Rich

that also includes a variety of butterflies, moths, bees and other pollinators, thronging the garden and the partly-reclaimed walls and steps of the manor house ruin.

"And there are a wide range of birds. Even owls roost in Heol Fanog's oaks, where they

and their chicks are hopefully protected from the dangers of collisions with speeding exorcists.

"Heol Fanog has been recognised by the Wildlife Trust as an exemplar of how to manage private land in tune with nature. And every year pears, apples, blackcurrants, beans, leeks, potatoes and more, yield healthy crops in the vegetable garden.

"In contrast to some of the more wind-swept pastures around Brecon, Heol Fanog is a calm oasis of biodiversity, protected from the elements by the trees which line its boundary. The humans who live there also value their private, quiet enjoyment of the house and grounds. Thank you for encouraging your listeners to be kind and give us privacy. We don't want to be drawn into discussion of what may or may not have happened prior to this residency.

"However, I can confirm that the infamous electricity meter has behaved itself for the whole of the 21st century. As a symbol, perhaps, of what Heol Fanog has become, a few years back a pair of swallows built a nest in the barn, perched on a tiny ledge. From there their brood flew to sunny Africa and back, in a cycle which repeats across the years. Can you guess where they nested and peacefully raised their young?

"On top of the electricity meter."

➡ **DR CIARAN O'KEEFFE** is a parapsychologist and investigative psychologist who regularly provides a sceptical voice on paranormal shows. He is Head of the School of Human & Social Sciences at Buckinghamshire New University, where he runs various programmes. His research has focused on testing mediums and psychics in the lab and fieldwork on ghostly experiences.

HEOL FANOG: A TIMELINE OF

PHOTOS COURTESY LIZ RICH



LEFT: Baptist minister David Holmwood, Liz and Rebecca at Heol Fenog. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Rebecca and Ben playing in the farmyard.

1989

MAY

The Rich Family first view Heol Fanog. A last drink in the pub before they move house – the bar bill is £6.66. The first supermarket bill after they move in is £66.60.

SEPTEMBER

Bill and Liz marry on 28 September.

OCTOBER

Ben is born on 23 October.

NOVEMBER

Bill hears the first footsteps on the landing (thinks it is Laurence). The Haunting begins. The next day an electricity bill arrives for £750 for a quarter. Laurence starts behaving oddly. Bill and Liz hear banging noises; they think it's a door slamming, but it isn't. They also hear footsteps descending stairs; footsteps continue at 6.15pm every day.

DECEMBER

Bill smells sulphurous odour in kitchen – calls plumbers, but smell has vanished. Liz smells incense in kitchen. Sulphur/incense smells continue for next few days. Hot and cold spots in house. Laurence paints his room deep red. Bill's work dries up.

1990

JANUARY – FEBRUARY

Problems with animals: goat crushed; pig gets disease and is shot; Laurence's guinea pig dies; cat goes mad. Financial worries begin, so they sell car; car batteries drain outside house. Piano plays by itself. Laurence tells Bill's mother to "fuck off" in demonic voice and smashes up his room.

MARCH

Liz contacts former resident Bridget Buscombe, who reports only one incident in her entire time there. Liz contacts a local Catholic priest who performs a blessing on the house. There are four days of calm, then Liz sees a sad woman in window of nursery. Bill and Liz research history of house. Bill writes to *Brecon and Radnor Express* and asks for information. The toilet becomes loose and a plumber is called who tells a story that in the 1960s he had installed radiators, but they were all ripped off the walls by some unseen force. A builder gets in touch, having read a local newspaper story, and tells Bill that gravestones were used to build house. Liz sees the old woman sitting in the nursery. Bill and Liz go to local council and ask to be rehoused. Their request is turned down. Bill's fingers go "weird" and he can't paint. Liz speaks to a medium in Cardiff who puts her in touch with Ray Williams, Head of the Christian Spiritualist Church in Cardiff. He tells her that Laurence should be sent away.

APRIL

Liz realises she is pregnant. Ray Williams, Larry Harry and a third person from the Christian Spiritualist Church arrive at the house, where Bill and Liz have their auras cleansed. Bill and Liz move out for three weeks to stay with Liz's mother in Cowbridge.

MAY

Larry Harry returns to house a few weeks later. He claims to find four spirits: an old lady; a mischievous young man; another young man; something that claims to be a Presbyterian and is attached to Bill.

JULY

Three French exorcists arrive and look around. The phone is cut off. Bill's fingers get temporarily better so he resumes painting. Larry Harry and some Dutch Spiritualist mediums arrive and claim to see seven witches. They also claim that Heol Fanog is on a confluence of ley lines and was built on a Celtic burial ground. Larry's group erect a "psychic wall" and draw a pentangle on the floor. Things improve temporarily. Bill gets a commission from neighbours to paint their horse. Bill sends Laurence away to boarding school in Brecon. Another blight descends on the area, with lambs and calves born blind or deformed. Bill finishes the commissioned painting of the horse. The horse dies in same field portrayed in painting. The neighbours burn the painting.

AUGUST

A "storm" breaks the psychic wall and hauntings start again. Rev Bryn Jones and Roy Matthews visit house and find three spirits and one demon. They claim they've removed them and calm follows for a few days. Liz sees a figure standing in trees several times.

DECEMBER

Rebecca born on 19 December. There is reported friction in the house between family members. The old woman keeps appearing in the house. Liz recognises her as Marion Holbourn, the owner's mother (who was interested in spiritual and paranormal matters). After Christmas Liz sees a seven-foot silhouette inside the house. She thinks evil has broken through. The family flee the house and go to stay with Liz's mother.

ANOMALOUS EXPERIENCES



PHOTOS COURTESY LIZ RICH

LEFT: Liz feeding the Heol Fanog pig; the farm animals all came down with mysterious illnesses. ABOVE RIGHT: Liz's mother Pat ironing in the farmhouse kitchen.

1991 JANUARY

In Cowbridge, Liz and Bill meet the local vicar and pray together. They turn to Christianity. Liz calls the Evangelist Rev Arthur Neil in Bridgend, who passes her onto Baptist minister David Holmwood. Holmwood agrees to visit and begins fasting in preparation. In Cowbridge, Liz's mother finds an Egyptian pendant. It gives Bill an electric shock when he touches it. He smashes it. Pools of water appear in the Cowbridge house.

JUNE

Bill and Liz return to Heol Fanog. Holmwood visits with reformed Satanist Anita Dick. An owl smashes into their car windscreen.

JULY

Holmwood and Dick return. They appear to be attacked in car again. They cleanse the house and tell Bill to clear it of anything evil. Holmwood identifies objects to destroy: paintings, books, incense burners.

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER

Holmwood continues to visit. Bill and Liz decide to become Baptists. Bill starts painting his "masterpiece".

DECEMBER

Liz hears an animal snoring/breathing heavily under the bed in her room.

1992

Nothing happens

1993 SPRING

Liz discovers she's pregnant again. Bill

"SOMETHING HAS BEEN GIVEN PERMISSION TO BE HERE. IT DOESN'T SEE WHY IT SHOULD GO" - EDDIE BURKS

sees a "breathtakingly beautiful young woman" in the kitchen. David Holmwood claims it was a "spirit of seduction".

JUNE-JULY

Nightmares about Egypt. Bill sees "Horus" in the kitchen. Liz realises it's the same silhouette she saw in late 1990. Holmwood manages to expel it over the phone, after which follows a period of calm. Bill finishes his masterpiece, a painting called 'Testimony'. Dispute with Swalec over electricity bill continues, with local solicitor Glyn Maddocks fighting the case. Liz calls *Christian World Revival* and asks for an exorcist. They put her in touch with Dr John Aston. Liz gets a Doberman called Beau. It acts strangely when in the house.

LATE JULY

After three months of prayer, Aston visits with three assistants. Liz is possessed. Brief period of calm, then things get worse.

NOVEMBER

Another story in *Brecon and Radnor Express*. The newspaper puts Bill in touch with psychic and exorcist Eddie Burks. Burks exorcises a bank in London.

1994 JANUARY

Third child, Tomas, is born on 2 January.

FEBRUARY

Bill reports strange incident with kitchen knife, which reappears on table after he put in a drawer.

MARCH

Eddie Burks visits with Captain Fergusson-Cuninghame, a North American Indian spirit guide and a TV crew. Following the visit, things calm down, but then Liz sees a disfigured man in the kitchen who walks into the garden.

1995

Throughout the year Bill and Liz see apparitions passing through house into garden.

JUNE

Eddie Burks returns with Ralph Noyes, Maurice Grosse and Montague Keen from the Society for Psychical Research. He exorcises the house, claiming an evil Celtic pagan force is at work.

1996 JULY

From 9 June, no further phenomena occur. The electricity bill has reduced to a normal amount. Bill's work picks up and an agent offers to represent him. The children's behaviour improves and Laurence visits regularly. The Rich Family move out of Heol Fanog on 9 July.

2005

Bill and Liz divorce on 5 April 2005.

SCIENCE VS BUDDHISM

Buddhism's dialogue with Western science is often held up as the poster child for a positive working relationship between two very different ways of thinking about our place in the cosmos – but does this come at the cost of scientists cherry-picking the bits of Buddhist thought that they like and ignoring the 'hocus pocus'? **IAN JAMES KIDD** argues that the two systems of thought might not be so compatible after all...

Buddhism gets a good press in the West for its positive relationship to science. Three kinds of claims are made. The first concerns

similarities between Buddhist and scientific styles of thinking. The Buddha was sensitive to experience and causality, and condemned appeals to tradition as an authority – qualities central to scientific enquiry. Second, Buddhist theory apparently anticipated key scientific concepts, from magnetism and radioactivity to insights of cosmology and neuroscience. Similarities and anticipations sometimes feed a third sort of claim. Buddhism can be *naturalised* – rendered consistent with the modern natural scientific understanding of the world. One philosopher says Buddhism, to become “acceptable”, must be “stripped of mind-numbing and wishful *hocus pocus*” like rebirth and karma.¹

Naturalised Buddhism must be ‘tamed’ by having its supernatural elements excised and replaced, where necessary, by superior scientific components.

A surprising number of Buddhists cheerfully endorse talk of the compatibility of science and their teachings. Or maybe it's not so surprising. Such claims have a long history going right back to the earliest European encounters with Buddhism. Jesuit missionaries asked perplexed monks to locate Mount Meru, the sacred moun-



LEFT: A third-century figure of the Buddha from Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan, now in New York's Metropolitan Museum.

tain of Buddhist cosmology, on a map. Victorians wondered if Buddhism's emphasis on 'dependent co-origination' was a crude awareness of the laws of nature. In this timescale, 1970s enthusiasts for Buddhism, like EF Schumacher or Fritjof Capra, were late to the game.

Nowadays 'Buddhism and science' dialogue is mainstream. The Dalai Lama is famously enthused about science. The Mind and Life seminars put Buddhist monks in dialogue with appreciative neuroscientists. Huge resources flow into scientific studies of 'mindfulness'. Academic and popular books explain how the 'ancient wisdom' of the Buddha offers profound lessons for cognitive science, ecology, and cosmology. Google 'quantum mechanics +

Buddhism' and count the hits.

I am sceptical about the compatibility of Buddhism and science. A snag is that there isn't a single thing called Buddhism. Across times and cultures, there are 'Buddhisms', with different themes and convictions. 'Science' is also ambiguous. It refers to methods, theories, and accounts of aspects of reality. Scholars, fortunately, think we can be confident in making at least one general claim. In the words of Donald Lopez, author of a set of excellent books

ACROSS TIMES AND
CULTURES, THERE ARE
'BUDDHISMS', WITH
DIFFERENT THEMES
AND CONVICTIONS



ABOVE: A Tibetan Buddhist representation of the 'Wheel of Life', complete with hells and hungry ghosts. LEFT: Fritjof Capra, whose 1975 book *The Tao of Physics* was a notable attempt to find parallels between Buddhism and scientific thought.



KNOWLEDGE AND REALITY

Start with the Buddha's own claims about the nature of reality – the 31 realms, karma and rebirth, the fact it had no beginning and will have no end. He was remarkably confident about this. Like all *buddhas*, he had perfect knowledge of reality, even if he only shared what was necessary for our enlightenment.⁴ Dharmakirti, a later Buddhist philosopher, explains the Buddha's knowledge went well beyond 'apparent' and 'hidden' things all the way down to the 'deeply hidden things' (*atyantaparoksa*). These are only accessible by special meditative insight. Scientific enquiry is confined to apparent and hidden things. No amount of

observation of experimentation could reach the deeply hidden things. Thanks to their level of knowledge, *buddhas* are "authoritative guides to the nature of reality and the best way to life".⁵ 'Right view', for the Buddha, means his view.

The Buddha also maintained that enquiry into reality is complete. The true nature of reality was discovered, aeons ago, by the first *buddha*. They described the 'realms' (*loka*) and heavens and hells and processes of rebirth and karma.⁶ Subsequent *buddhas* repeated these teachings to a world that had forgotten them. Science, by contrast, operates on an assumption of ongoing enquiry into a largely unknown reality. The broad outlines of a true picture of the world may be slowly coming into view, but future discoveries and revolutions might change even those. Final certainty is not a feature of the scientific outlook. The Buddha has no such qualms, assuring his monks that the Dhamma he taught is a final and total statement of what they need to know to move towards 'release'.⁷ The *Brahmajala Sutta* describes rival accounts of reality as 'false views' that need combatting.⁸

These are big differences in our sources of knowledge about reality and in the status

on Buddhism and science, compatibilism is "so preposterous as to be unworthy of sustained analysis".² Lopez is sensitive to the cultural and historical richness of the traditions emanating from the man born as Siddharta Gautama: check out *The Scientific Buddha and Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*.³ What are his objections to compatibilism?

We can distinguish three big ones. First, it usually trades on facile conceptions of Buddhist doctrines. Any two things can be made compatible if you're vague enough on the details. Causality, for instance, for the Buddha, refers to the interactions of our experiences, desires, beliefs, and emotions – not what physicists study. Second, we find that *compatibility* in practice often means an *assimilation* of Buddhism into the terms of science. Natural science defines what claims are acceptable. Anything incompatible is airbrushed out. A third objection is that compatibilism represents a failure genuinely to engage with Buddhism. If the options are a facile compatibility or dismissal as *hocus pocus*, we need more options.

A snag is that concepts like karma, rebirth, and *dukkha* (suffering) are complicated. Their meaning and significance are debated, and scholars and practitioners of Buddhism disagree a lot. A careful study of specific doctrines may also be premature. It can help to point out some very general differences between the Buddha's vision of the world and basic assumptions of the scientific project.

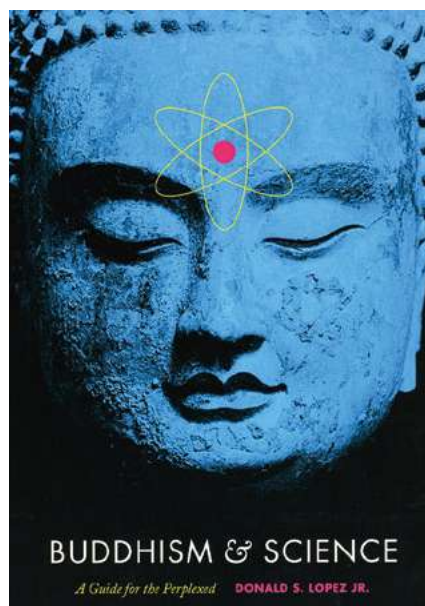


ABOVE: Tibetan Buddhist monk Jigme Pema Wangchen, head of the Drukpa school, visits the CERN facility in Geneva. **BELOW:** Donald J Lopez's *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed* rejects glib compatibilism. **FACING PAGE:** A 2019 documentary recorded the Dalai Lama's meetings with scientists from around the world.

of that knowledge as certain and final. The Buddha's confidence is far from the humility of scientific enquiry. Moreover, the Buddha's cosmology is radically different from scientific cosmology. He describes *devas* and demons, hells and heavens, 'hungry ghosts' and endless processes of karma and rebirth. One author gets around this in a brisk way. His book – *Why Buddhism is True* – starts disarmingly by explaining he does not believe in any of its "exotically metaphysical aspects".⁹ Buddhism is true – except the bits the author cannot believe. The Buddha would not agree. 'Right view' means understanding the cosmic context of our moral life. 'Unwholesome' acts will see us condemned to perpetual 'wandering' through realms of suffering and rebirths as demons and 'hungry ghosts'.

Must we accept the Buddha's insistence that accepting the cosmology is necessary for the moral practices? This is a matter of lively debate. Is acceptance of karma essential to Buddhist moral practice? Can we follow the Eightfold Path without supposing it leads us out of *samsara*? What is lost if we downplay the prospect of rebirth? Such questions are not easy to answer. Still, asking them is better than dismissing them. The author who dismissed karma and rebirth as *hocus pocus* calls his stance about all other traditions and worldviews 'cosmopolitan' and 'non-committal'. But he also insists that "scientific ... ways" of thinking should be "preferred when describing the way things are".¹⁰ Here commitment to naturalism undercuts the cosmopolitanism.

THE SCIENTIFIC PICTURE OF THE WORLD BLOCKS OUR EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE RELEASE FROM THE CYCLE OF REBIRTH



LIBERATION

Suppose we shift away from the Buddha's confidence in his cosmology to the aims of the Dhamma or Dharma. Everyone knows the ultimate objective is 'release' from the ordinary human condition of ignorance, craving, and suffering. Scholars will distinguish different soteriological goals.¹¹ (Better rebirths? Release from the cycle of rebirth?) Whatever the goal, right view means appreciating the dreadfulness of existence. Life in *samsara* is dreadful. 'Defiled' beings forever 'burning' in the 'fires' of delusion and hatred, dominated by 'grasping-craving'. Spiritual progress, says the Buddha, slowly brings about 'disenchantment' with the world. Our horrible 'greed' for existence withers away.¹²

The Buddha's pessimistic account of *samsaric* existence, disturbing as it may be, also challenges compatibilism.¹³ An obvious difference are the aims. Science and technology are intended to enhance human life and seek knowledge for its own sake. The Buddha, by contrast, urges us to 'transcend' life and only seek knowledge that will 'conduce to nibbana'. Scientific enquiry asks questions irrelevant to our salvation. In several *suttas* we are given lists of 'open questions' to be ignored, like ones about the origins and age of the Universe. Such enquiry "does not belong to the fundamentals of the holy life" and the wise do not waste time on them. The only relevant knowledge is that which will "lead to disenchantment".¹⁴ In scientific cultures, the opposite happens. Cosmology and biology encourage wonder,

fascination, awe, and a sense of the beauty of the world.

The scientific picture of the world also blocks our efforts to achieve release from the cycle of rebirth and karma. The obvious reason is that there is no place for those concepts in that picture. There is no karma, no rebirth, no hells to avoid, no *deva*-realms, no *moksa*. By denying them, science shows itself to be what the Buddha called ‘wrong views’ – they are false in ways that prolong our entrapment in *samsara*.¹⁵ The consequence is a double whammy: the ‘wrong views’ are all promoted as objective truth whereas the ‘right view’ taught by the Buddha is dismissed as laughable *hocus pocus*. In a striking twist, the Buddha actually predicted the corruption of the Dhamma. Over time, his teachings will be eroded and eventually replaced by ‘counterfeit Dhamma’ (*saddhamma-patirupa*). The domination of ‘wrong views’ will lead to the obliteration of Buddhism.¹⁶

IRONY

The Buddha’s teachings on knowledge, truth, reality, and liberation pose serious obstacles to compatibilism. Karma, rebirth, and cosmic realms with supernatural denizens are a million miles away from the methods and worldview of our modern sciences. But what about the Dalai Lama and other high-profile Buddhists who voice enthusiasm for science? Endless books document ‘dialogues’ between scientists and monks which are full of compatibilist rhetoric. If Buddhist leaders seem to endorse compatibilism, then should we not defer to their judgment?

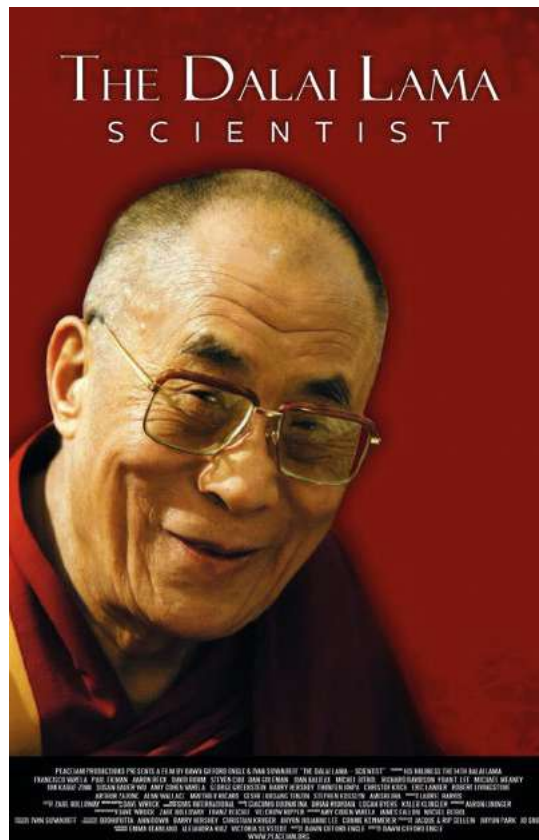
Not necessarily. Closer inspection reveals the extremely *modest* character of many of those Buddhist claims. The Dalai Lama talks of respect for reasoning and experience – but that’s rather bland. Agreeing that disputes should really be settled by evidence hardly confirms the compatibility of Buddhism and science. There are some deeper explanations of apparent compatibilist rhetoric by Buddhist leaders, too. I already mentioned one: the idea of ‘deeply hidden things’, a realm of reality scientific methods cannot reach. When the Dalai Lama won applause for saying he would abandon his belief in karma if physics disproved it, he surely knew that science could *never* disprove karma. Such aspects of reality are ‘unfathomable’ even for a *buddha*.¹⁷

A second explanation of Buddhist compatibilist talk is to see it as an example of ‘skillful means’ (*prajña upaya*). This means adapting how one presents the Dhamma to the values and abilities of the audience.¹⁸ The Buddha was a very good teacher and knew you have to speak in ways which resonate with students. Skillful means is therefore a missionary or conversion strategy. The *Lotus Sutra* refers to it as “devices” for presenting Buddhist teachings to “the relative igno-

rance” and the “passionate attachments” of the unenlightened.¹⁹

When Buddhists make compatibilist claims, they may be engaged in skillful means. Most people in Western societies, if not all, are ‘passionately committed’ to scientific methods and the scientific worldview.²⁰ Playing up the compatibility of Buddhism and science is necessary to attract and keep the interest of those people. The Dalai Lama admits that talking about evidence and reasoning and downplaying the role of faith is “very helpful in communicating with scientists”.²¹ It means express-

patibilism might be attractive as a way to gloss over those differences. But this comes at the cost of our failing actually to engage with that different vision. Differences ought to be acknowledged and explored rather than smudged over or denied. Charles Fort warned against the risks of dogmatic commitments to science. We don’t need to rush to adopt the Buddha’s cosmology – I don’t! – but *exploring* is a different activity to *endorsing*. We can certainly do better than people who are prone to dismiss what they can only see as “mind-numbing and wishful *hocus pocus*”.



NOTES

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- 3 *The Scientific Buddha: His Short and Happy Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012) and *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- 4 *Samyutta Nikaya* 56.31.
- 5 Peter Harvey, 'The Approach to Knowledge and Truth in the Theravāda Record of the Discourses of the Buddha', William Edelglass and Jay L. Garfield (eds.), *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 175.
- 6 Lopez, *The Scientific Buddha*, 111.
- 7 *Samyutta Nikaya* 56.31.
- 8 *Digha Nikaya* 1.3.
- 9 Robert Wright, *Why Buddhism is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 269.
- 10 Flanagan, *Op. Cit.*, 2 and 5.
- 11 Mikel Burley, *Rebirth and the Stream of Life: A Philosophical Study of Reincarnation, Karma, and Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).
- 12 *Samyutta Nikaya* 1.28 and 35.28.
- 13 David E Cooper, 'Buddhism as Pessimism', *Journal of World Philosophies* 6.2. (2021): 1-16.
- 14 *Majjhima Nikaya* 63.7-8.
- 15 *Majjhima Nikaya* 117.1.
- 16 *Digha Nikaya* 26.3-5.
- 17 *Anguttara Nikaya* 4.77.
- 18 Michael Pye, *Skillful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1978).
- 19 *Lotus Sutra*, ch.2.
- 20 Thupten Jinpa, 'Science As an Ally or a Rival Philosophy? Tibetan Buddhist Thinkers' Engagement with Modern Science', B. Alan Wallace (ed.), *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004), 81.
- 21 Quoted in Arthur Zajonc, *The New Physics and Cosmology: Dialogues with the Dalai Lama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6-7.

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UNIDENTIFIED FASCIST OBJECTS

NAZI INVASION FROM THE PLANET TLÖN

In an extract from his new book *Nazi UFOs: The Legends and Myths of Hitler's Flying Saucers in WW2*, SD TUCKER unearths the pseudo-historical artefacts of a persistent military myth and asks: is the notion of Nazi spaceships really a flier?

Beginning in 1946, the year after he had supposedly shot himself dead in a Berlin bunker, no less an individual than Adolf Hitler began mailing out a long-running series of letters to persons living in the rural eastern US States of Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia.

These letters – in which Adolf strangely billed himself as “the Furrier” rather than ‘the Führer’ – came soliciting donations for a cunning new Nazi plot to enslave America, the world, and finally the galaxy itself. It turned out Hitler had been taken alive after all, and had escaped across the Atlantic, where his latest communications, written in the kind of barely literate English you might expect from a non-native speaker, made their recipients a tempting offer: in return for charity in the form of postal-orders, Adolf would consider making each donor his official “Furrier #2”. As Hitler would accept individual sums as low as \$5 for his cause, this represented quite a bargain. Hiding out in a top-secret location somewhere in the enemy heartland, Hitler had established no fewer than 116 underground factories, with his 36,000-strong army of German revolutionaries digging tunnels towards Washington where he would later establish his “new kingdom”. Within these subterranean lairs Adolf’s scientists were busily manufacturing atom bombs and an indestructible fleet of “invisible spaceships which make no sound” with which to defeat America. If those in receipt of the Furrier’s begging-letters had not already seen or heard such wonders buzzing through their local skies, then this only showed just how invisible and silent



IN A 1947 GALLUP POLL, 45 PER CENT OF AMERICANS THOUGHT HITLER WAS STILL ALIVE

these craft were – the ideal vehicles, Hitler maintained, to launch a “surprise attack” on the White House.

Authorities were tipped off when Adolf’s most generous supporter, a 70-year-old Virginia stonemason with the good old Teutonic

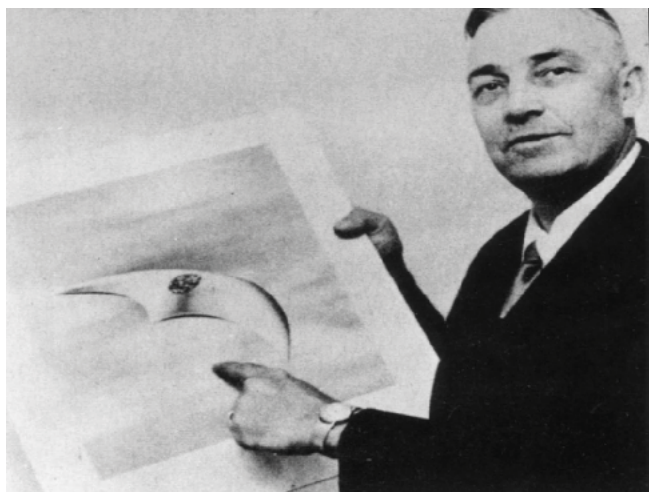
name of GA Huber, dropped dead. Huber’s family did not expect to inherit much from their relative, living as he did in a pathetic wooden shack. Yet the reason Huber was destitute was because he had blown his \$10,000 life-savings on aiding Hitler’s future coup.

A 1947 Gallup poll showed 45 per cent of Americans believed Hitler was still alive, and Huber, described as being in “poor physical and mental health”, had taken it upon himself to investigate the fugitive Führer’s whereabouts. After Huber’s death, around 200 handwritten Nazi begging-letters were found in his hovel, together with stacks of money-order receipts filed away as proof of Huber’s purchase of the eventual role of Deputy Furrier.

Alerted to the existence of this looming totalitarian plot, officials lured Adolf into a

Kentucky post office to pick up a vital new donation, a money-order worth as much as \$15, towards annexing the Universe. As soon as Hitler cashed the cheque on 11 August 1956, he was arrested, despite the dictator’s shrewd disguise – that of a 61-year-old black man, surely the last identity you would expect to have been assumed by history’s most notorious white supremacist. Once behind bars, the dark-skinned prisoner had to admit he was not the Furrier #1 at all, but a former coal miner and part-time Baptist mountain preacher turned mail-order fraudster named William Henry Johnson.

Lined up to be Furrier #3 behind Huber was the Tennessee handyman Charlie Brown who, despite his name, had hardly been sending Johnson peanuts. Around \$1,000



ABOVE LEFT: Kenneth Arnold points to an artist's impression of one of the "peculiar aircraft" he saw over Washington State's Cascade Mountains on 24 June 1947.
ABOVE RIGHT: A 1944 news clipping concerning the floating "silver balls" that would come to be known as 'foo fighters'.

had been squeezed from Charlie by promising him a "royal palace" and his "choice among... virgins", with a forced child bride to be sourced from the families of the future Nazi diplomatic corps once Washington had been obliterated. So eager was Charlie for his reward that when contacted by investigators he had only eight cents and a single can of beans left to live off, having just mailed Hitler his final \$20. So impressed was he by Brown's sacrifices that Adolf wrote to Huber admitting he might make Charlie "assistant world-ruler [alongside yourself] for his bravery act last week [in sending me money]". Sometimes, Brown was brave enough to send Hitler other things via the US Postal Service too, specifically a natty sports-coat and pair of size-11 white shoes, it being "necessary for Adolf to dress sporty so he won't be recognised" when goose-stepping around town.

Charlie very much wanted to meet Adolf, but this would blow the demonstrably non-white Johnson's cover, even if he donned full Nazi field-uniform and a fake moustache, and every time a rendezvous was arranged, it was irritatingly thwarted at the last moment by Adolf falling suddenly ill or becoming trapped in his room by FBI agents. In fact, Hitler's future assistant Charlie Brown was black too; perhaps the Nazi Party was now an equal opportunities employer.

William Henry Johnson had high hopes for the potentially bottomless nature of both his fellow human beings' gullibility and their wallets, signing some letters in the name of A von Boguslawski in apparent mockery. He sometimes slipped up and signed letters in his real name. Johnson hoped the authorities would prove equally stupid, claiming that as a top undercover private detective, he had perpetrated the scam at the behest of a group of shadowy Chicago-based intermediaries, but that once he had amassed enough proof, he intended to turn double-agent and warn the FBI about the hidden Nazi spacecraft factories. In court, he showed off a large home-made badge reading 'SECRET SERVICE', and claimed to have graduated from a "Chicago Secret Service correspondence school" for spies, on

whose behalf he was tracking Nazis. When arrested, Johnson provided a written confession that "I am guilty of everything", but added he would only admit this if the police guaranteed his case would not make the papers, so his Baptist congregation wouldn't discover their preacher was a criminal. If no such deal was forthcoming, Johnson warned, he would have to plead not guilty instead. But as he had also confessed he was "a poor guilty criminal" and that while his victims had been "crazy enough to send me money, I had been crazy enough to spend it", it is hard to see how he could deny culpability. Further armed with the knowledge he had a prior 1951 conviction for postal fraud, a jury took only 15 minutes to find Johnson guilty. 'Hitler' received three concurrent three-year sentences, much to the disgust of loyal black Nazi Charlie Brown, who, such was his devotion to the cause, testified on the false Führer's behalf. He was impressed that, after being arrested, Hitler had benevolently returned \$800 of the \$1,000 he had previously stolen to build his new Luftwaffe space-fleet.

SOURCES OF THE SAUCERS

The Kentucky Hitler Hoax appears to show that, as early as 1946, a mere year after German defeat, there was already an imaginative connection being made between the ostensibly unconnected fields of Nazism and UFOs. In fact, Johnson's initial acts of fraud predate the very idea of UFOs. The word 'UFO' was first used by the US Air Force (USAF) in the late 1940s and early 1950s, in particular by USAF Captain Edward J Ruppelt. His dry adoption of the term 'Unidentified Flying Object' was intended in a literal sense, as indicating some unknown object seen in the sky, not as a technical-sounding synonym for 'alien spaceship'. Ruppelt hoped 'UFO' might replace the hitherto ubiquitous label 'flying saucer', as the majority of reports investigated by him were not of classic disc-shaped objects at all. This earlier term gained currency in the wake of the first widely-publicised UFO-sighting, that made by the private pilot Kenneth Arnold over Washington State's Cascade Mountains on 24

June 1947, where he spied "a chain of nine peculiar aircraft" flying at "a terrific speed" – the first ever flying saucers. Yet they were not saucer-shaped at all, the term famously being the result of a media misinterpretation of the pilot's description of them moving through the sky like pebbles skipping over water, and Arnold's initial thought was that they were secret aerial weapons, unmanned "guided missiles, robot-controlled". These proto-drones might have been the work of enemy powers, reasoned Arnold – not aliens or Nazis, but Russians. The Great American Public only half-agreed. In a 14 August 1947 Gallup poll, the idea Arnold's saucers were ET vessels did not even register statistically, and the most popular non-dismissive answer, held by 15% of respondents, was also to guess they were secret weapons – but US ones. Only 1% thought they belonged to Moscow. The most popular response, that they were due to "imagination, optical illusion, mirage, etc", was chosen by 29%, while 10% thought them a hoax. Among the 9% who advanced "other explanations", Gallup didn't mention *anyone* blaming either Hitlerites or Martians.

Yet editors had papers to sell, and the fringe angle that Nazis might have caused Arnold's close encounter was worth more of a shot than saying aliens were flying them. On 9 November 1947, reports were filed by Canadian reporter Lionel Shapiro that General Franco had been sheltering escaped German scientists under "personal sponsorship" in his own continuing dictatorship of fascist Spain, where they had built him "two highly advanced weapons of war" – descendants of the real-life futuristic *Wunderwaffen* ('wonder-weapons'), such as the V-1 and V-2 rockets, that the Nazis had deployed near WWII's end. One was a tiny nuclear artillery shell, the other a brand of long-range "electromagnetic rocket" which Franco, rather daringly, had just proceeded to test-fly over the USA, leading to Arnold's fateful sighting over the Cascade Mountains. The missiles, known as KM-2 after the initials of their Nazi inventors, Professors Knoch and Muller, definitely worked, as they had been test-launched off the coast near



COURTESY, FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARY, ARLINGTON, TEXAS.

ABOVE LEFT: The model diorama – supposedly depicting a ‘Nazi Foo-Fighter’ – in the Roswell UFO Museum, Roswell, Texas. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Major Jesse Marcel poses with his indestructible, tinfoil-like super metal at Fort Worth Army Air Field on 8 July 1947.

Malaga, “while Franco watched from the deck of his yacht”. Shapiro had “stumbled upon” this story by “accidental interception of a document” being circulated by “the agent of an independent European spy organisation” who intended to sell Franco’s blueprints to the highest bidder. If you think that all sounds a bit too Ian Fleming for its own good, you’re right. Shapiro was also a writer of thrillers and spy stories, with a new novel, *The Sealed Verdict*, to promote in 1947. The notion of ‘Spanish Saucers’ is now wholly forgotten, but lingered vaguely on until 1949, by which time it was being suggested a still-living Hitler was hiding out in Spain too, cradling his new *Wunderwaffen*.

Once Kenneth Arnold had accidentally given birth to the flying saucer, a second bastard-child was then equally inadvertently sired: the Nazi flying saucer. Although Nazi Germany ceased to exist in 1945, flying saucers did not exist as such until 1947, and so all talk of Nazi saucers is, by definition, backwards mental projection. Like the plain vanilla saucers themselves – which, remember, *did not look like saucers at all* until the newspapers accidentally said they did – those bearing swastikas were also a concocted, media-spawned fantasy. Yet the notion that the Third Reich might have possessed top-secret super-weapons which would have been unleashed to wreak anti-gravity, laser-spitting death upon a defenceless world had Hitler strung out the war for a few more months was a story of great potency. As such, it has sold a lot of books, films and newspapers down the years – one such media product being that all-time great known as ‘The Roswell Incident’.

HISTORY IS BUNK

On a remote ranch at Roswell, New Mexico, also in 1947, something very interesting happened – a flying saucer did not crash there.

SEVERAL MODEL MANUFACTURERS WILL TODAY SELL YOU KITS OF NAZI FLYING SAUCERS

Despite this fact, due to a complex series of misunderstandings, many people, influenced by the Kenneth Arnold story, came to believe that one had done so. Today, a non-museum stands near the site of this non-event, commemorating its non-occurrence with a series of curious non-exhibits – one of which is a plastic, camouflage-painted Airfix-type model of a Nazi flying saucer surrounded by toy German troops, the whole diorama bearing the label ‘Nazi Foo-Fighter? (1945)’ – a foo-fighter being an odd glowing ball of aerial light often spotted by Allied air-crews over Germany during the war. They were subsequently reclaimed by ufologists as being early, pre-Arnold flying saucers even though the original, generally spherical, foos were not actually shaped like saucers at all (but then, neither were Arnold’s). Unlike the usually tiny real-life foos, most of which were probably unusual meteorological phenomena or misperceived flak or flares, this Airfix saucer is big enough to be piloted and its *Flugkapitän* has climbed on top with the aid of a ladder, where he busily ties his jackboot. One soldier down below is feeding a kitten, fitting in with the well-known fact that Nazis were always kind to animals. Appropriately enough, Roswell’s International UFO Museum and Research Center is located inside an old cinema.

Most visitors will take note of the

question-mark on the display-label and draw the obvious conclusion: this is another one of those fascinating historical questions to which the answer is ‘no’. But others will take it more literally, as a legitimate issue being currently disputed by military historians. Puzzled tourists might visit Wikipedia, typing in ‘foo-fighter’ to see what comes up. There, they will be confronted with a large photograph of the very same diorama taken direct from the Roswell Museum. If they don’t bother to read beyond the first paragraph of the accompanying article, as many won’t, they might conclude that the Nazis did indeed develop their own combat-ready saucers, and that these were called foo-fighters.

Where did the Roswell Museum get hold of such a thing? It was hardly an Unobtainable Flying Object. Several military model-manufacturers will today happily sell you kits of Nazi saucers. These are actively pushed as if actually once flown by daring Luftwaffe pilots; in some parallel universe, perhaps they are even now busy bombing Lego-Land. Ads deliberately make them sound like real craft of Nazi-era vintage, as with the Squadron toy company’s following marketing spiel on amazon.co.uk: “According to some, Nazi Germany’s scientific capabilities were so advanced that they began work on a series of secretive spacecraft.

Known as *Haunebu*, these flying saucers were built upon specialised engines developed by the Third Reich and... remain in underground bases around the world. A newly tooled replica of the otherworldly Nazi spacecraft, this 1:72-scale plastic kit features a well-equipped interior (with three main operating consoles, nine crew seats, and a grated floor), a three-piece upper exterior, forward bunker housing, two-piece bottom disc, a retractable entrance ramp (with extension), a main turret (with detachable

roof), two 110mm cannons, optional-position landing-gear, four rotating ball-turrets (with 80mm guns), and one clear sprue (with injection-moulded windows). Assembly required.” If you want to know more about “the infamous German WWII Haunebu II project”, head to Squadron’s website, where you can view a video of an SS man inspecting a full-size computer-generated saucer in its hangar. Squadron’s slogan is ‘SQUADRON: BRINGING HISTORY TO LIFE’, but what if such ‘history’ was never actually lived in the first place?

The Roswell International UFO Museum didn’t open until 1991, as the Roswell UFO-crash itself, despite ostensibly taking place in 1947, didn’t *really* happen until 1980 when a best-selling book, *The Roswell Incident*, appeared, based upon interviews with a key man on the scene, military intel officer Major Jesse Marcel. Marcel spun a highly sellable yarn about indestructible tinfoil-like super-metals inscribed with ET hieroglyphs raining down upon New Mexico, but said nothing about now-familiar later additions to the tale, like alien corpses, which only bloomed in the wake of the 1980 book. The Roswell affair had been largely forgotten prior to this, so the subsequent ‘witnesses’ to alien autopsies were reacting more to a recent 1980s publishing event than any original nuts-and-bolts saucer-crash of 1947. Had the book never appeared, presumably they would have kept quiet, because it was *the events in the book*, not down on the ranch, they were really claiming to have seen.

Had the Roswell UFO Museum tried to open back in 1947, it would have had no exhibits. Nobody opens a museum devoted to something that didn’t happen... until, that is, the thing that didn’t happen suddenly *does* come to have happened, not in physical reality, but in the public imagination.

Fast forward to today, and the Roswell International UFO Museum still has no proper alien exhibits, but it does have a popular myth to sustain it, and so can invent whatever displays it needs to fit in with it, even totally spurious ones involving Nazis. Thus, we end up with the mind-bending spectacle of a museum opened in 1991 to commemorate the reinvention of an event that didn’t occur back in 1947, but was *said* to have done, retrospectively, from 1980 onwards, containing a plastic model of what appears to be a Nazi *Haunebu II* flying saucer, a specific sub-category of Nazi craft invented by online fantasists during the 1990s, being used to represent a different form of flying saucer, known as a foo-fighter, which was witnessed for real during the years 1939-45 by Allied pilots, but never in the form of an actual flying saucer, because flying saucers didn’t exist until 1947, when Kenneth Arnold didn’t see one, the very same year another one then quickly didn’t crash at Roswell. I trust that all makes sense.



ABOVE: One of the many plastic kits of Nazi Haunebu saucers available from military model manufacturers.
BELOW: Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, whose philosophical tales played with metafictional devices.

A REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS NOT PAST

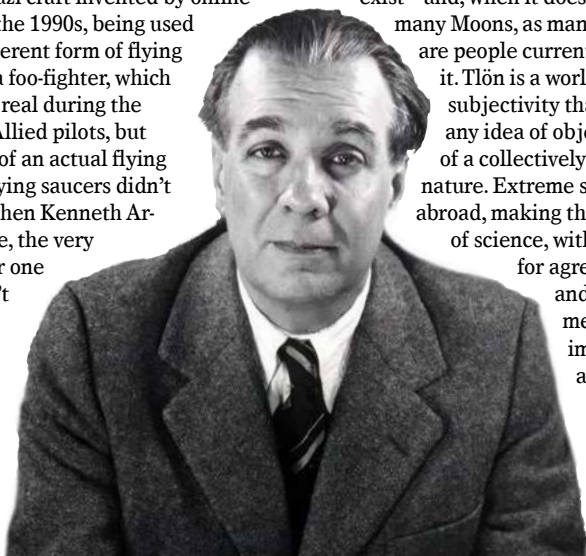
The never-ending rain of Nazi-related ufo-logical documents, photos, testimonies and even full-blown physical artefacts, of debatable ontological status and veracity, strike me as nothing but so many *hrönir*.

A *hrön* is a concept introduced by the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges for his 1940 short story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, about a secret society who create a fictional world named Tlön and then plant suggestive textual evidence of its supposed existence within genuine printed reference works, thus sowing a seed within the human mind that such a place might actually be real; today, they would be posting fake images of ‘Nazi Foo-Fighters’ on Wikipedia. On Tlön, objects do not exist physically in space, so much as subjectively in time, within the fleeting moment-by-moment perceptions of them by individual citizens. As such, on Tlön there are no nouns; as the Moon is not conceived of as an objectively extant object, independent of its observers’ momentary perception of it, you can’t speak of ‘the Moon’ rising as such, but must use a verb to say that ‘it mooned’ in the night sky. When nobody is there to see it, the Moon does not exist – and, when it does, there are

many Moons, as many as there are people currently looking at it. Tlön is a world of radical subjectivity that destroys any idea of objective facts or of a collectively agreed-upon nature. Extreme solipsism is abroad, making the very notion of science, with its need for agreed formulas and standard measurements, impossible – and yet this

does not mean there are no sciences on Tlön. Instead, there are *infinitely many* sciences, as citizens compete to devise the most unusual, entertaining, or aesthetically pleasing ones best suited to their own tastes. For them, writes Borges, “metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature,” not a search for truth.

Tlönites apply such principles to history too. Via the fabrication of fake objects dubbed *hrönir* and the planting of them within dig sites, akin to the fake debris of fake saucer-crashes, archaeologists can manufacture their own past. The past becomes not an objective thing, but one formed of memories. Once forgotten, the past disappears, as all objects (if defined as being purely objects of *perception* like Tlön’s moon) do; Borges describes a doorway that only remained standing because a beggar used to sleep beneath it at night and which dissolved at the very moment of his death. The past becoming plastic in this way, combined with the manner that a second generation of *hrönir* can be manufactured from a previous one, before this second generation itself then gives birth to a new cohort of *hrönir*, and so on *ad infinitum*, has peculiar consequences. Ultimately, the difference between fact and fancy becomes so confused that apparently genuine artefacts called *ur* turn up which appear to authenticate the faked *hrönir* which simultaneously preceded and succeeded them depending upon which perspectival time-frame you wish to examine the whole situation from – so, for us, the flying saucers of Kenneth Arnold are *hrönir* which subsequently begat further generations of themselves (in terms of other people seeing saucers too), which then in some reverse-chronological sense somehow managed to begat the original *ur* of solid 1940s foo-fighters which preceded them in the historical record. Suddenly,





There are no UFOs, just U.S. secrets

► Lamy resident says stories about "space aliens" are propaganda to cover up a giant government conspiracy.

BY TOM SHARPE
COLUMNIST, STAFF WRITER

Bill Lyne says stories about space aliens and UFOs are part of an elaborate government conspiracy to keep secret the existence of man-made electronic flying machines.

"I can spot them in the sky almost any night, usually over Forest Acres," Lyne said. "The last resident said in a recent interview, 'You won't find them in Florida.'"

Lyne said many people mistake these machines for stars, but that he has learned how to distinguish between the two.

Lyne, living near the "Secret Airbase from the Pentagon," said "Sometimes they flash lights brightly so much that they give you a headache." "You may have noticed Lyne's self-published book in some local stores."

"Space Aliens from the Pentagon," with Lyne's hand-drawn sketches which appear as technical drawings in a light blue color, is a book about the existence of flying machines.

The 20-page book also is set the record straight, at least from Lyne's point of view, about the "Secret Airbase from the Pentagon."



ABOVE LEFT: Nazi *Wunderwaffen* included these tiny craft piloted by Hitler Youth according to William Lyne. ABOVE RIGHT: Lyne pictured in a local newspaper holding the compass he said came from a Nazi saucer. BELOW: Lyne's book *Space Aliens from the Pentagon*. FACING PAGE: *Peiltochterkompass* or junkyard finds?

these newly minted *ur*-artefacts were recast within the memories of 1940s Allied pilots as strange, solid alien machines trying to down their planes from German skies several years beforehand, rather than just eerie aerial lights or Nazi flares as they had been usually recalled as being previously. Foos were thus revealed not as truly physical objects existing consistently throughout time, but subjective temporal perceptions of what might be termed 'foo-ness', whose precise nature has since proven to shift endlessly between different observers, like the precise essence of the moon on Tlön. This ufological *ur* then spawns further *hrönir*, like the *Haunebu II* craft of the 1990s, models of which then end up placed on display within Borgesian pseudo-museums labelled as 'Nazi Foo-Fighters'. In Borges's original fiction, the forged encyclopædias of Tlön are a form of literary *hrönir* so compelling they slowly become the objects of mass belief until such a point that "a fictitious past occupies in our memories the place of another, a past of which we know nothing with certainty – not even that it is false".

This is the confusing world of online conspiracy theory and endlessly competing belief-systems we inhabit today. And, once the *hrönir* of these competing 'truths' gain hold and our previously agreed-upon reality melts away to be replaced by that of Tlön, the next stage is the arrival of apparently genuine physical artefacts of this alien world within our own. In his story, Borges's narrator finds "a cone of bright metal the size of a die" that, in his palm, feels impossibly heavy for something so tiny. All who hold it feel it is horribly "wrong", somehow not of this Earth – it is an artefact of Tlön. So, you might say, were the indestructible 'alien metals' supposedly handled by Major Jesse Marcel

at Roswell in 1947. In a world of objective truths, Marcel's tinfoil-like materials were just that – tinfoil, from a downed weather-balloon. Once the *hrönir* get into your head, though, the tinfoil becomes part of a ship from Planet Tlön, a tangible artefact of a new reality. The USAF could obtain some of this tinfoil, analyse it in a lab and say, "Look, we told you – it's just tinfoil. Here, make a new hat out of it!" But for the Jesse Marcells of this world, the 'mysterious metals' in question have already become not simple physical objects, consistent in space-time, but wholly subjective mental objects, like a Tlönite mind-moon, and such crudely objective results would seem antiquated, outmoded and irrelevant.

IMMORAL COMPASS

It is an amusing coincidence that the other object which seeps into being straight from Planet Tlön in Borges's story is a compass bearing letters from the Tlönite alphabet, which apports uninvited into a jewellery box one day. Some contemporary ufologists speak of another pair of fictional Nazi *Wunderwaffen*, this time both defensive in nature: the *Magnetofunk* ('Magnetic-Radio') and *Himmelskompass* ('Heavenly Compass'). Incredibly, say such fringe-theorists, some Nazis may have survived the war in a far-flung Arctic UFO-base called Point 103, using their *Magnetofunk* contraption to "deflect the magnetic lines of force in the instruments of Allied aircraft ever so slightly" – which, over the "vast tracts of the Arctic", would be just enough to steer them off-course,

thus preventing the Germans from being detected. If the *Magnetofunk* fooled compasses into thinking the magnetic North Pole was somewhere else, though, then how did Nazi saucers find their way back home? By use of their onboard ultra-sensitive *Himmelskompass*, of course, which oriented itself northwards by sensing polarised light from the Sun, not magnetic fields. By measuring solar levels, a simple calculation could be performed by Nazi ufonauts to establish their position in relation to the real magnetic North Pole, so allowing them to navigate with complete accuracy, unlike their pixie-led US and Canadian counterparts.

But the ultimate source for this 'fact' is a piece of outright fiction – namely, a 1971 neo-Nazi novel written by an unrepentant Austrian SS officer named Wilhelm Landig for the purposes of converting gullible sci-fi readers to his fascist cause (see FT420:41-45). The

novel implausibly purports to be based on fact and, like the original forged encyclopædia entries about Tlön, has since been taken as an authentic account of another world by those who want to believe in miracles. Also like Borges's Tlön, the Nazi UFO-base of Point 103 has since begun to generate physical artefacts of its own existence, even though it has none. Ufologists have unearthed genuine references to both "an artificial horizon" and a "Mother Horizon"

within US interviews with German Luftwaffe POWs, taking these as coded references to Landig's *Himmelskompass*, even though mention is made in these same documents of such aerial aids functioning via gyroscopes,



not polarised sunlight. However, artificial horizons are not compasses, being intended to allow aviators to maintain their planes at a level axis with the ground during flight, not to direct them towards Magnetic North. So, today's Tlönites must describe these descriptions as "brief and rather cryptic", as such 'references' are not truly references to the *Himmelskompass* at all. Still, though, enthusiasts reproduce photocopied transcripts of such POW interviews, which functionably as *hrönir* for those willing to view them as such. The next step, according to Borges's model, would be for a faked physical *Himmelskompass* to appear somewhere – maybe in a little glass box inside the Roswell International UFO Museum. Such a *hrön* couldn't be that hard to manufacture, could it? Maybe one day, with a bit of luck, it might even produce its own *ur*? Maybe it already has ...

One modern-day promoter of compass-related *hrönir* is William Lyne, the obscure American author of *Space Aliens from the Pentagon*, who argues the standard idea of mass extraterrestrial invasion is pure baloney, used to cover up the fact that saucers are actually 100 per cent man-made – by Germans. Lyne thinks the USA is an unfree dictatorship in disguise, as shown by the process of "CANNIBALISTIC FASCIST LITIGATION" he was subjected to by "judicial turds" between 1986 and 1992, when the courts ruined his life following a lawsuit relating to his purported invention of some fantastic new solar voltaic cell. Innocently filing a patent application, Lyne was disgusted to have it stolen by an undercover Nazi *Wunderwaffen* inventor working for the US Shadow Government, with the profits shared between the Aryan scientist, the CIA and the military-industrial complex. Lyne now perceived the entire US Patent Office was a scam, intended to steal naïve inventors' ideas for the undercover "TlumiNazi" State. By employing "illiterate or semi-retarded" patent clerks, it proved easy for CIA front-corporations to exploit the Office's "weird rules" and claim the blueprints for themselves, undermining the whole basis of intellectual property rights. Several attempts were made to murder Lyne to keep him quiet, such as having children infect his food with salmonella, so in 1993 he released his book-length exposé of what other evil expatriate *Wunderwaffen* inventors had perpetrated in cahoots with the "small-time toadies, drug-dealers, money-grubbers, property-thieves, trashy and crooked realtors, title examiners and insurers, yeggs and socialist bureaucrats" who had ruined him. To promote his self-published text and "punish the elite", Lyne then posed in a local newspaper, complaining about persecution by homosexual spies and holding a giant compass, bigger than a man's head, with a fluorescent dial and swastika in the middle. It appears genuine, presumably coming from



some mundane German war-machine, but Lyne boasted it came straight from a Nazi saucer.

Lyne and his parents had personally encountered UFOs in Texas, one of which was "egg-shaped" and caused his father's car to stall. Via extensive research, Lyne discovered such ovoid "Flying Turtles" had been back-engineered by the CIA from Nazi *Wunderwaffen* like the very small and spherical fo-fighters, which were not remote-controlled ET drones after all, as many UFO-buffs had theorised, but instead were piloted by tiny Hitler Youth members who steered them from within (which "must have required a lot of dexterity, like a videogame or a skateboard"). Lyne provides an amusing cutaway illustration of a small foetal-position child inside such a craft; their deadly electromagnetic ability to make enemy plane-engines fail was proved by his dad's dead car.

The Nazis also had larger *Kreisel Teller*, or "gyrating plate" saucers, one of which had rescued Hitler from his bunker in 1945 and ferried him away to a waiting cigar-shaped flying aircraft-carrier called the *Graf Zeppelin*, which could also function as a submarine or spacecraft. From here, Hitler and his girlfriend could control a U-boat fleet armed with nuclear missiles which had surrounded the USA, ensuring a tense stalemate situation. If Washington didn't let Hitler and his lover return to live in a "cosy and secure" house in Germany under covert military protection, the country would be nuked. Lyne thought this plausible because he had met Hitler himself at the 1967 World's Fair in Texas. Then an artist, just as the young Hitler had once been, Lyne was painting pictures, one of which Adolf appreciatively cast an expert eye over, before the Führer was recognised and "whisked away by security agents".

Lyne had childhood connections to Roswell, whose local disused POW camp his father had bought and demolished, repurposing its materials to build a family home. In 1947, the infant Lyne had used

iron bars from the prison's windows to conduct electromagnetic experiments, eventually developing a "Triax System" which implied the Universe was a giant invisible battery from which you could gain a free source of inexhaustible Green energy. Throughout the 1970s, Lyne frequented scrap-dealers, seeking bits and bobs for a perpetual-motion machine, buying his giant Nazi compass in an Albuquerque junk-yard in 1979 for only "a handshake, a smile and \$7.50". Stolen from a US base where *Wunderwaffen* had been back-engineered by imported Nazi scientists, Lyne found it was marked *Peiltochterkompass*, which he (wrongly) interpreted as meaning 'Polar-Slave-Compass'. He thought it must have been used aboard a Nazi saucer as a "celestial or inertial guidance-system". But was it really likely

ufological *Wunderwaffen* components could be bought in a junk-shop for less than \$10? "In retrospect," wrote Lyne, "I have decided that the *Peiltochterkompass* and other items may have been clues placed there intentionally, and that perhaps someone expected me to interpret their use" – these men must have been agents from Tlön. Or did they really hail from Point 103?

Following Lyne's media appearances, his colossal compass has been acclaimed by some fantasists as proof the Arctic-set Nazi-UFO novels of Wilhelm Landig must have had some nuts-and-bolts basis in truth after all, even though they were nothing but blatant neo-Nazi recruitment tools. Landig's *Himmelskompass*, although entirely fictional, thus turns out to have had its impossible ancestors: proof positive that every *hrön* has its *ur*. If Borges were alive today he would surely have continued writing his rich line of absurdist fiction – albeit printing it not under the old-fashioned label of 'literature', but of its imaginative rival, 'ufology'.



Nazi UFOs: The Legends and Myths of Hitler's Flying Saucers in WWII by SD Tucker tells the full non-history of the origins of the legend of Hitler's fake saucer-builders of WWII, and is available now from Pen & Sword/Frontline Publishing, priced

£19.99. Also available is a companion-volume, *The Saucer and the Swastika: The Dark Myth of Nazi UFOs* (Amberley, £20), which tells the different tale of the various bizarre contemporary neo-fascist faiths predicated upon the false idea that Hitler once built his own spaceships.

♦ SD TUCKER is the author of many books on fortaen topics, including *Blithe Spirits* and *Forgotten Science* and writes the regular 'Strange Statesmen' column for FT.

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Englishmen in the afterlife

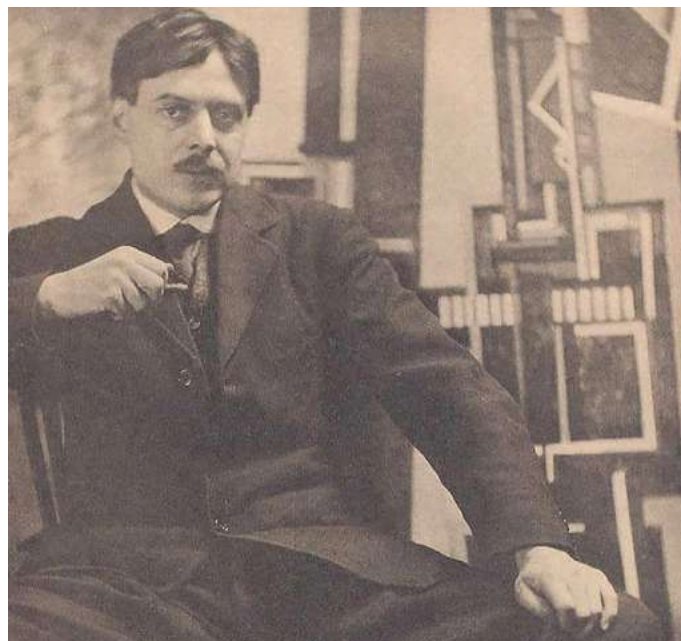
RICHARD GEORGE
grapples with modernist
maverick Wyndham
Lewis's most forteen
work, the 1928 novel
The Childermass

You would not have taken Wyndham Lewis to Woodstock. This pugnacious painter, pen-propeller and polymath, who died in 1957, spent 40 years in pitched battle with irrationalism. What he'd have thought of this magazine I shudder to imagine. But his 1928 novel *The Childermass* foreshadowed much of our science fiction (as well as bewildering booksellers; "John Wyndham? *Quatermass?*")

Lewis fought in the Great War, and the premise is simple: two of its soldiers, Pullman and Satterthwaite, in the Hereafter. *The Childermass* is most often seen as an allegory, but it is also an attempt by a mighty intellect to envisage what happens when we die.

At first they struggle to walk, like astronauts, in a foggy reddish atmosphere familiar from Robert Crookall's analyses of OBEs and NDEs in *The Supreme Adventure*. But this is not the only challenge. Geography is temporal as well as spatial. "Time-stuff" crashes like waves: features appear and disappear. They expend much energy getting nowhere.

"What is this place we are in?" asks Satterthwaite forlornly (p.87). Pullman, the senior and much the brighter of the two, does his best, invoking palingenetic phantoms and the Irish physicist John Tyndall, who experienced altered consciousness after an electric shock. "The sense of freedom one sometimes gets is perfectly staggering," Pullman says (p.120), echoing many Spiritualist communications. Although Lewis detested



LEFT: Wyndham Lewis during WWI.

*"Time-stuff"
crashes like waves:
features appear
and disappear*

Spiritualism, associating it with Romanticism, he seems *au fait* with it.

At one point his double act are engulfed by a time-hallucination of the 17th or 18th century. Surroundings shrink: it's like the St Hugh's girls, Moberly and Jourdain of Versailles time-slip fame, in *Attack of the Fifty Foot Women*.

Eventually Pullman and "Satters" reach a desert plain traversed by a river (the Jordan?). In the distance shimmers the ultimate destination, the Magnetic City (a magnificent word-portrait by Lewis). Before that, however, they must register in an encampment (shades of The Authority in Pullman's namesake's *The Amber Spyglass*), presided over by one of literature's strangest characters – the Bailiff.

In Lewis's afterworld, like

Konstantin Raudive's, politics does not disappear. The Bailiff is an autocrat, and has replicated, by a kind of Virtual Reality, reassuring Earth conditions. Remember Hitler in Raudive's *Breakthrough*, offering to help lost souls?

But this is not his only source of power. If he's Mussolini, he's also Charlie Chaplin: he's an entertainer, the only show in town, and he dances the pants off Winston Churchill. He reminds me rather of what Crookall calls "The boasters, jokers, liars and impersonators of the immediate 'next world'" (*The Supreme Adventure*, p.229). He is, in fact, though this is not a comparison I imagine Lewis would have liked, one of John Keel's Cosmic Jokers.

The lability of space-time in this world gives the Bailiff Proteus-like qualities: "Some say he is Jacobus del Rio, some a Prince of Exile, I have heard him called Trimalchio Loki Herod Karagueuz Satan, even some madman said Jesus, there is no knowing what he is." (p.85)

Add one name: Crowley.

I don't know if Wyndham Lewis ever met Aleister, but the portly Bailiff, with his regalia of Astarte,

Maha-Yuga and goat foot, is a brother. Then again, he could be a Roman emperor, sating his subjects with Juvenal's "grain and grandstands"; any dodgy prophet you like from L Ron Hubbard to James Jones, or Donald Trump or Russell Brand on the Internet. He is a celebrity for being a celebrity, and Lewis understands how dangerous this is.

His rhetorical antagonist, Hyperides, tells him: "You still find that among the most profitable to deal in are drugs and philtres, pornography and lightning cures..." (p.193). This Bailiwick (or Isle of Wight?) is a flapper's free-for-all, and Lewis's premonition of the permissive counter-culture is striking (we even hear, on p.348, of "atonic jazz"). In one extraordinary passage, the Bailiff shape-shifts into Bacchus, amid "telepathic salves of sympathy and admiration" (p.230). How very Grateful Dead ESP experiment; how truly, madly Jim Morrison.

Much of the second half of *The Childermass* consists of the Bailiff, in front of his captive audience, grotesquely channelling Lewis's philosophical and cultural anathemas. This is hard going, one of the reasons the novel is not better known. Today Lewis faces cancellation, for all kinds of blasphemies against the woke. But if you see copies of *The Childermass* and its sequels, *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta*, grab them. They are amazingly prescient.

So is this: "The ideas of a time are like the clothes of a season: they are as arbitrary, as much imposed by some superior will which is seldom explicit."

Charles Fort, in *Wild Talents?* No, Wyndham Lewis. It's from a work of political philosophy called *The Art of Being Ruled*, published six years earlier.

♦ **RICHARD GEORGE** attended Wyndham Lewis's centenary exhibition in London, aged 17.

The Asbury Revival

TED HARRISON reports on the spontaneous religious revival at Asbury University in Kentucky and looks back at similar 'outpourings of the Holy Spirit' in modern history.

Most church services end with a hymn and a prayer and the congregation goes home, lingering only perhaps for friends to chat over coffee served at the back of the church.

On 8 February, after a Wednesday morning service on campus at Asbury University in Wilmore, Kentucky, USA, a gospel trio sang a final song and the service ended; but not everyone left the building.

Some 20 students stayed behind. They were scattered around the chapel, and continued to pray. After an hour or so they started singing and students, curious to see what was going on, joined them. Word quickly spread around the campus of the Methodist college that a 'revival' was underway.

In the Protestant, charismatic tradition of Christianity, a revival is understood to be a rare, once in a generation event, involving the 'outpouring' of the Holy Spirit. What happens is that a whole community undergoes a shared experience of religious reawakening which takes the form of extended gatherings for worship which can last for days non-stop and are full of emotional excitement, often with speaking in tongues, public confessions and healings. Those taking part believe that they are experiencing a special supernatural revealing and renewal of God as Holy Spirit.

In America, the idea of revival dates back to the 1740s and a period in church history known as the Great Awakening, an outbreak of religious fervour that occurred both in Europe and the American British colonies.

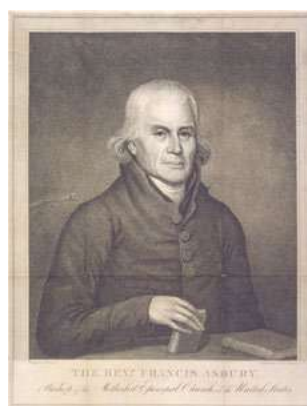


ABOVE: The scene in Asbury University's Hughes Auditorium during the revival. BELOW: The Reverend Francis Asbury. FACING PAGE: A 19th century Methodist revival meeting in the United States.

At Asbury, in this latest claim of a revival, the university chapel was alive with singing and prayer for over two weeks, all day and all night. At times the chapel, which is known as the Hughes Auditorium and has a capacity of 1,500, was so full and the balconies so crowded that overflow rooms had to be arranged. Visitors came from across the USA and some from as far afield as Finland as news of the event spread via social media. The revival recorded over 100 million views on TikTok.

The Asbury Revival posed huge logistic problems for the small community of Wilmore, normal population 6,000. At the height there were 20,000 visitors. all curious to witness what was going on and perhaps themselves hoping to be caught up in the atmosphere of the revival experience. On the university campus, students and staff had to improvise bathroom facilities and hurriedly organise how to provide food and drink for the unprecedented number of worshippers.

The Asbury student president,



Alison Perfater, told Fox News: "For seemingly no reason at first, the chapel service didn't end. That's kind of the logistical side of what's been going on. On the deeper side of things, what's been happening here is there's a young army of believers who are rising to claim Christianity, the faith, as their own, as a young generation and as a free generation."

This was not the first revival to have occurred at Asbury. The university takes its name from Francis Asbury, an 18th century

Methodist bishop who travelled across the USA on horseback, preaching and encouraging revivals as he went (the city of Asbury Park, New Jersey, also takes its name from the wandering preacher).

The university teaches a conservative theology with an emphasis on the working of the Holy Spirit in the world. One similar 'outpouring' of spiritual emotion at the university 50 years ago lasted 185 hours, and another in 2006 was four days long. What was different about the most recent revival was that it outlasted either by a considerable margin and attracted huge international interest, not least because it was live-streamed on YouTube. The Asbury Revival took on particular importance for American Conservative Christians as it appeared to contradict recent demographic studies in the USA that have pointed to religion being of less interest and importance to the younger generations. Although all age groups were represented, the event was largely made up of under 25-year-olds.



“Gen Z has been through a lot,” said the university’s director of strategic communications, Abby Laub. “They are hungry for truth and peace.”

What was also noted as significant was that the events that unfolded at Asbury were entirely spontaneous. Many past Revivals have been well planned by large churches and around high-profile preachers. At the end of the last century, preachers such as Oral Roberts led highly orchestrated revival meetings where miraculous healings were said to take place – even, it was claimed, the raising of a boy from the dead.

Nothing so dramatic happened at Asbury. Observers have likened it to old-fashioned revival meetings, with rhythmic songs, mostly with repetitive refrains and words familiar to all: the event was so unplanned that there had been no time to arrange to project any words onto a communal screen. There was much free-flowing prayer and much murmuring in tongues. Everywhere young people, when not kneeling, were standing with both arms raised and, judging from the live-stream pictures, rapturous expressions on their faces.

Austin Wofford, from the university, witnessed events first-hand and reported what he saw on his social media accounts. “Asbury Chapel continued in waves of prayer, worship, and gut-wrenching public confession. It was a significant and spontaneous move of the Spirit that lasted for hours. What a phenomenon to witness.

“Some were reading and reciting Scripture. Others were standing with arms raised. Several were clustered in small groups praying together. A few were kneeling at the altar rail in the front. Some were lying prostrate, while others were talking to one another, their faces bright with joy.

“They were still worshipping when I left in the late afternoon and when I came back in the evening. They were still worshipping when I arrived early Thursday morning – and by mid-morning hundreds were filling the auditorium again. By Thursday evening, there was standing room only. Students had begun to arrive from other universities.



Observers have likened it to an old-fashioned revival meeting

“The worship continued throughout the day and indeed all through the night. On Saturday morning, I had a hard time finding a seat; by evening the building was packed beyond capacity. And as of Sunday evening, the momentum shows no signs of slowing down.”

It was almost 30 years ago that another ‘revival’ hit the international headlines. The Toronto Blessing has been subsequently described as an “episode of high-octane religiosity” which spread world-wide from Canada and led to a wave of Pentecostal enthusiasm in many churches around the world. There were graphic reports at the time of worshippers being rendered unconscious or whooping and shaking uncontrollably, laughing and making animal noises (see FT77:24-28).

Descriptions of revivals from history speak of similar behaviour involving sober individuals behaving in most uncharacteristic ways. During some of the Welsh revival meetings of the 19th and early 20th centuries there was often celebratory jumping for hours at a time in heavy clogs, and English tourists crossed the border to come and witness the phenomenon, in the same way curious visitors have crossed state and national borders to drive to Asbury.

What the Asbury revival visitors found, by contrast with Wales of old, was less theatrical. Thomas McCall, a professor of theology at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, made this observation: “There is no pressure or hype.

There is no manipulation. There is no high-pitched emotional fervour. To the contrary, it has so far been mostly calm and serene. The mix of hope and joy and peace is almost palpable.

“As an analytic theologian, I’ve seen efforts to manufacture ‘revivals’ and ‘movements of the Spirit’ that were sometimes not only hollow but also harmful.” At Asbury, he said, “Something unusual and unscripted is happening.”

One academic study of the Toronto Blessing suggested that a form of mass hypnosis could be offered as an explanation. Other academics who have studied revivals refer to the social context in which they occur, seeing them as a response to change. The students at Asbury represent a generation brought up in the American Protestant tradition, probably with parents who are political conservatives, looking for a way to make sense for themselves of a changing world.

In some ways, the Asbury events are reminiscent of the student protests and sit-ins of the 1960s. They performed a similar function of bonding the student population together, although the declared pretext was very different. And the fact that the actions attracted wide media attention gave the students a sense that they were involved in something of wider significance.

Revival phenomena are not restricted to Christian Protestant churches. Hindus report similar practices and responses associated with the awakening of a divine feminine energy known as Kundalini.

At Asbury, after more than two weeks of non-stop worship, the university authorities announced that the Hughes Auditorium would be closed to outsiders. It was a precaution, they said, citing the spread of measles.

Asked if he was stopping the revival, Asbury President Dr Kevin Brown said: “We cannot stop something we did not start. This was never planned. Over the last few weeks, we have been honoured to steward and host services and the guests who have travelled far and wide to attend them. The trajectory of renewal meetings is always outward – and that is beginning to occur.”

Revival groups continued to meet on other parts of the campus and the momentum moved away from Asbury. Christian colleges and universities around America reported revivals of their own.

Asbury had become a national talking point. “The Lord is at work at Asbury and Lives will be Changed Forever,” tweeted the former US vice president Mike Pence.

By 1 March, the website Godreports claimed the revival had spread to at least 31 locations worldwide. Revival hot spots included other locations in Kentucky as well as in Maine, Minnesota and Michigan. Internationally, revivals were reported in Israel, Mexico, New Zealand, Brazil, Australia, and Africa. In Uganda, a simultaneous revival reported 300 healings, including a claim of a man being raised from the dead.

What the long-term consequences will be is as yet unknown. Will there be a religious re-awakening among young Americans? Or will it all fizzle out like the Welsh revivals of yesteryear, the only legacy now being empty and boarded-up chapels around the country?

♦ TED HARRISON is a writer, artist, film-maker and former BBC religious affairs correspondent. He is a regular *Fortean Times* contributor.

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA ForteanTimes

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Big cats near Bournemouth

These books may have ranty digressions and be full of typos, says **Matt Salusbury**, but they are essential reading for anyone with an interest in cryptozoology

The British Big Cat Phenomenon

Jonathan McGowan

Hangar 1 2022

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Pb, 153pp, £14.77, ISBN 9798839169654



Jonathan McGowan's achievement in gathering so much evidence for big cats in Britain over a lifetime is extraordinary.

The British Big Cat Phenomenon comprises four slim volumes. It's unclear what order they're in, but I'm guessing *Differing Theories* comes first, followed by *Searching*, then *Sightings* and then *Environmental Impact* as the final book in the series.

Differing opens as an evocative natural history memoir, describing McGowan's first sightings of big cats as a teenager in the 1980s. After an abusive childhood with periods in foster care, the young McGowan sought solace in watching wildlife, badgers in particular. It was through nocturnal badger watching that McGowan had his first big cat encounter – with a Dorset puma apparently stalking badgers.

McGowan's experience as a "field naturalist" frequently leads him to big cat sightings – the warning calls of birds alert him to a big cat in the area. He has received multiple reports of

a British "running cat" observed while it's on sustained, long-distance chases after deer. This is different behaviour from leopards and pumas – ambush predators that can only manage short sprints.

Searching dives straight into the evidence accumulated from McGowan's decades of experience in his "study area" around Bournemouth and Poole. Evidence includes scats (big cat poo) and scent sprayed on bushes and posts. There are partial deer skeletons that have fallen out of trees after storms.

There's much detail on scent markings and "scrapes" – claw marks in the ground made by big cats scent-marking – on big cat footprints and on how to distinguish them from dog tracks, as well as scratch marks on trees made by climbing leopards.

There are even urban big cats – their scats show up on Poole's parks, golf courses and streets. They travel along Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole green corridors and leave scratches on garden gates, and they feast on rats, foxes and domestic cats.

People report hearing the low guttural growls and coughs of Dorset leopards. Puma screams are more cat-like or human-like. Police have been called out when a puma scream was mistaken for a human's.

On camera traps and why they produce so few big cat images, McGowan describes the phenomenon of bait suddenly disappearing from them. "Something very strange is going on." I'd have appreciated sources for McGowan's



It was through nocturnal badger watching that he had his first big cat encounter: a puma

assertion in *Sightings* that cats can avoid the infra-red of camera traps by sensing electromagnetism through their whiskers.

Where is the big cat road kill? In some thinly-populated parts of the USA, a third of all young pumas are killed on remote roads. But given the UK's road traffic density British big cats would, McGowan believes, already be acclimatised to constantly passing cars and be better at dodging them.

Big cats would probably survive most collisions anyway – just as many domestic cats somehow manage to crawl home after a road collision.

McGowan and others have seen big cat roadkill on busy dual carriageways where it's too dangerous to slow down to investigate. Returning a few hours later there's nothing left, the remains



squashed so flat as to be unrecognisable. He found the Blackwater Junction Black Cat – "totally pancaked out"; its skin had melted to the tarmac and its bones were all crushed.

Sightings includes 69 photos of big cat field signs and kill signs. Included are many photos of big cat paw prints with McGowan's boot for size comparison, together with images of big cat feeding places littered with bones and

grisly images of kills including dead swans and a half-eaten fox.

Stomach-churning detail describes how big cats kill their prey. Leopards clamp their jaws round the muzzle of a deer in a full-face hold to suffocate it; pumas often bite deer's noses off. Kills by dogs and foxes are much messier than those of a big cat.

Why are there so few photos of the big cats themselves? "This is a valid point," admits McGowan. There are a few in *Sightings* – a blurry photo of a "blonde puma" and a clearer trail cam image of a big cat sharpening its claws on a tree.

Environmental includes a guide to British big cat scats, with 22 monochrome photos of long, thin, twisted spiralled scats of leopards, lynx, puma and jungle cats. Some big cat scats that McGowan has found contain bones and deer hooves.

There is no bibliography, index or referencing. Nor is McGowan's mostly compelling thesis helped by ranty digressions on how results of DNA tests are "covered up by the authorities". He asserts that the population is "brain-washed" into big cat scepticism, and so on. He's let down by his editors too, with basic typos too numerous to mention.

McGowan concludes *Environmental* by convincingly asserting that "the evidence for large cats living in Britain is overwhelming." Issues with the format and structure notwithstanding, the content of the four volumes of



The British Big Cat Phenomenon make it essential reading for any serious British big cat investigator.

★★★★

Scientists and witches

Ronald Hutton reads of the different stances on witchcraft within the early Royal Society

The Last Witch Craze

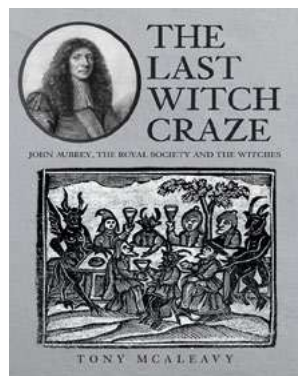
John Aubrey, the Royal Society and the Witches

Tony McAleavy

Amberley 2022

Hb, 287pp, £20, ISBN 9781445698427

One of the features of the past few years has been a boom in good local studies of witch trials and beliefs, produced by academic and independent scholars alike. Tony McAleavy's new book fits partly into this framework, being the work of a very able independent scholar in love with North Wiltshire, and especially the town of Malmesbury. It is anchored in events and personalities connected with the area. It is also, however, a much larger and more important enterprise, being a contribution, based on careful primary research, into the relationship in Britain



between witchcraft beliefs and the new experimental science of the late 17th century.

During the late 19th and 20th centuries it was assumed that the two phenomena were antithetical, and that the advent of the new science ushered in a rational and sceptical modernity which brought about the end of witch trials in Britain. From the 1980s onward that assumption evaporated, as it was realised that some of the most avid and distinguished proponents of that science were also determined

defenders of a belief in demons, and in witches with whom those beings were in league, and so in the need to continue the prosecution and punishment of presumed witchcraft. McAleavy's project consists of a detailed study of those men – especially Henry More, Robert Boyle, Joseph Glanvill, Robert Plot, Elias Ashmole and John Aubrey – who populated the newly formed Royal Society for the advancement of science and attempted to use experimental evidence to prove the existence of a spirit world linked to witches.

This study achieves significant new advances in knowledge. One is to elucidate the relationships between them and to show the ways in which they encouraged or reacted to each other. Another is to demonstrate the manner in which their publications impacted on the public, and encouraged witch trials across the English-speaking world, including notorious group prosecutions such as those in Renfrewshire in 1697 (through the Scottish intellectual Francis Grant) and those at Salem in 1692 (through Increase and Cotton Mather, the Boston savants). Yet another is to show the differences within the group of witch-fearing scientists, most notably between the clergymen More and Glanvill, who condemned all magic, especially astrology and the conjuring of spirits, and the laymen Ashmole and Aubrey, who were attracted to it and collected handbooks of spells.

The book brings in a much wider cast of lesser characters associated with its main protagonists, and so establishes a rich context for the debate over the reality of magic in the period. It is excitingly written, has no apparent errors or blemishes and represents the best kind of independent scholarship. Now we need a parallel volume on the networks of sceptics who were in the end to win the debate and end witch trials in Britain.

★★★★★

A History of Delusions

The Glass King, a Substitute Husband and a Walking Corpse

Victoria Shepherd

OneWorld 2022

Hb, 352pp, £16.99, ISBN 9780861540914

What is a king trying to tell us when he claims that he is made of glass? Or the man who says that his head is not his own?

Victoria Shepherd delves into the history of delusions via a compelling series of individual case studies, arguing that delusions can be a powerful way of understanding individual and collective anxieties.

Many FT readers will be familiar with James Tilly Matthews, whose life was exhaustively documented in Mike Jay's *The Air Loom Gang* (2003). Matthews believed his mind was being controlled by French revolutionaries through a mysterious contraption called the Air Loom, and fans of Jay's book will enjoy what Shepherd adds to the Matthews story.

The most fascinating chapters, though, are those that explore the lives of less well-known individuals such as "Madame M", a middle-aged woman living in Paris during World War I. Madame M believed that members of her family were being replaced by doubles, the real versions of them spirited away to vast underground tunnels as part of a city-wide conspiracy.

In a society dealing with mass death, missing soldiers and war propaganda, it was hardly surprising that such themes were echoed in delusions like Madame M's. Shepherd effortlessly weaves together individual cases and broader social and political events, offering fascinating glimpses into topics beyond the psychological: French plans to construct a "fake Paris" complete with replica streets to confuse German bombers, for example, or the dark trade in rats that emerged to feed starving Parisians during the 1870-71 Siege of Paris.

Many cases in the book come from France, a country historically characterised by upheaval, rapid urbanisation and shifting social structures. Although brief mention is made of medicine in

late 18th-century France, when the structure of Parisian health-care changed after the Revolution, more could perhaps have been done to link French developments with psychiatry elsewhere in Europe. For the reader new to the history of psychiatry, however, Shepherd is an excellent guide, offering concise accounts of specific diagnoses and a particularly absorbing account of the work of French asylum doctor Philippe Pinel.

The question of who gets to define a delusion, and where the boundary between reality and delusion lies, is a recurring theme. Delusions are historically and culturally contingent, as their frequent reliance on modern technologies (guillotines, magic lanterns, telephones) suggests. Shepherd's approach to the topic, melding doctor and patient accounts with broader historical commentary, means that we close the book convinced of her central message: delusions are not signs of madness, but "important and compelling" phenomena. They are both a means of communication and a way to deal with the painful and uncertain realities of life.

Jennifer Wallis

★★★★★

The Art and Science of the Crystal Palace Dinosaurs

Mark Witton & Ellinor Michel

The Crowood Press 2022

Hb, 192pp, £30, ISBN 9780719840494

This book is the most excellent account of the construction of the dinosaurs, other prehistoric animal species and geological exhibits at Crystal Palace Park in the 1850s and their survival into the present day. It is a well-illustrated account using much contemporary artwork and available photographic material.

The dinosaurs are life-sized models set on an island in the park lake, exhibited near other prehistoric animals modelled in their true size. The diorama shows off the larger species in front of a cliff with pterodactyls attached and the aquatic species on the edge of the lake. The book covers their creation, their survival into the present day and their current condition and care.



The construction was carried out during the time of the Victorian movement towards public exhibitions and education. Original charts and maps are reproduced and these are annotated to show how some of the exhibit (possibly one third) has been lost from both the reconstructed geological strata and some of the models.



Palaeontologist Richard Owen advised, while Benjamin Waterhouse

Hawkins sculpted the models; he actually held an 1853 New Year's Eve Banquet in the base of the Iguanodon mould. Hawkins's famous incorrect use of the one iguanodon thumb they had, as the nose horn, had appeared already in an 1863 illustration.

Palaeoart and fossil reconstruction were well known, but the Crystal Palace reconstructions, though not the first, were then the largest and most life-like ever attempted for public viewing.

The decline of the surviving models continues due to the weather over the last 170 years, vandalism and in part the materials used in construction. Experimental materials were sometimes used and although these produced the desired models they did not endure. Subsequent restoration has not always been faithful to the original interpretation and establishing what was original is part of the ongoing research reported here.

This book presents much of the written material known and the illustrations alone are highly informative.

The authors request that anyone with photographic or other illustrative material of the exhibits should contact them. Although the site is much visited, there are few surviving photographs of the models from recent decades and earlier.

Anyone interested in the dinosaurs and their ongoing conservation should consult the Friends of Crystal Palace Dinosaurs. A trust is being set up to raise funds in order to conserve, research and promote the history and science of the models and the geological court, in this wonderful Victorian Park setting.

Ray Heaton

★★★★★

UFO Landings UK

Philip Mantle

Flying Disk Press 2022

Pb, 266pp, £15.50, ISBN 9798654537966

Philip Mantle provides a survey of the high-strangeness close encounter cases that have impressed him since his involvement with the subject in the 1980s. So it is not an attempt at chronicling every UK UFO landing report, but a personal survey of what he regards as the most compelling cases sourced from *Flying Saucer Review*, BUFORA, UFOIN, YUFOS, John Hanson's *Haunted Skies* books and his own investigations.

The Rendlesham Forest landing case is not included as it has been extensively covered elsewhere, and there is a peppering of other cases he could have men-



tioned, including the Alan Godfrey encounter or the Rowley Regis encounter with its angelic, mince pie-munching aliens.

Mantle does include a report of a fiery, pyramid-shaped object that wrecked a house and a bridge as it plummeted down to Earth in 1767, and an 1896 tale of a man who witnessed a meteor followed by a group of small sized "fairies" who danced in a circle before being transported away by the returning meteor.

A 1908 report tells of two uniformed humanoids who came out of a metallic vehicle in the back garden of a boy who lived in the West Midlands and there are a sprinkling of other pre-1947 stories that were mainly reported many decades later.

There are numerous reports by children that sound like the product of their imagination, and when there is more than one witness the group consists of relatives or friends at the same locality. The best physical evidence consists of marks in the ground that usually disappear by the time they are investigated. The high strangeness of the cases could be down to fantasy, misidentification or fabrication. Sadly, the last case is dated February 2010 – have UFOs given up landing here now?

The last chapter provides a wider perspective of these cases by featuring the opinions of Mantle's respected UFO colleagues. Andy Roberts and Gloria Heath-

er Dixon point out the unreliability of witness testimony and David Clarke notes that these reports are a sociological phenomenon that reflects trends in popular culture. Steve Mera, Nick Pope, Chris Evers, Bob Tibbits, Mike Covell, Carl Nally, Brian Allan and Ron Halliday suggest that physical and even ET craft are responsible for these instances. Mantle is happy to label such cases "Unidentified".

Plenty of helpful diagrams, photographs and sketches are provided, but the text is full of (autocorrect?) errors. It is also let down by a lack of consistent references or even a short bibliography; otherwise this is an excellent guide to UK landing cases.

Nigel Watson

★★★★★

The Ghost in the Image

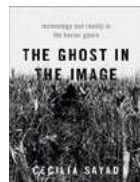
Technology and Reality in the Horror Genre

Cecilia Sayad

Oxford University Press 2022

Pb, 168pp, £22.99, ISBN 9780190065775

Film scholar Cecilia Sayad examines the interpenetration of fact and fiction in a number of forms of the horror genre and discusses



how they influence each other in their efforts to engage the viewer. The resulting uncertainty over the status of

what is being shown can affect the viewer's confidence in determining the point at which one ends and the other begins, a situation exacerbated by technology's increasing sophistication and ease of use.

To demonstrate her thesis, she ranges across such disparate areas as spirit photography, ghost-hunting "reality" shows, paranormal documentaries, "found-footage" horror films, audience role-playing participation at augmented screenings, video games and Internet-generated fan fiction – the last concentrating on Slenderman, a fiction which has had serious real-world consequences. The growth of immersive virtual reality holds the ability to elide the image and the spectator's perception still further.

Sayad raises questions about how we evaluate the evidence in

real-life cases when overlaid by fiction and presented as mass entertainment, as in the *Conjuring* franchise, for example, and conversely when fiction is presented as fact with no reliable way to establish its status. Surprisingly, she does not include the 1992 *Ghostwatch* programme, many of the original viewers of which were, despite ample cues, unsure whether they were watching fiction or an authentic broadcast from a haunted house.

A chapter is devoted to the Amityville and Enfield cases, focusing on the recycling of the source material of each in documentary and fictional treatments "that exaggerated, modified, and added details", thereby radically altering it.

Curiously, having made the point, Sayad is puzzled that *The Conjuring 2: The Enfield Case* "dissociates itself" from Guy Lyon Playfair's book on Enfield, *This House is Haunted*. The reason is easily understood, because his book and the film share little in common and Playfair, still alive at the time and notoriously prickly, would not have endorsed a screenplay putting Ed and Lorraine Warren, who spent just a few days in the house, at its centre and depicting alleged phenomena bearing nothing in common with the lengthy investigation he undertook with fellow investigator Maurice Grosse.

As Sayad notes, the eroding of fiction/fact boundaries, and the difficulty in disentangling them, applies not just to the paranormal but to images of all kinds, especially in ideologically contested areas where their malleability can be exploited to manipulate and confuse as readily as to illuminate. We are flooded with images of doubtful origin and motive, and can struggle to decode them in the face of conflicting narratives.

The Ghost in the Image is a useful attempt to develop a theoretical framework with which to analyse horror's hydra-like expansion beyond its fictional domain as it co-opts the factual in its desire to keep the customers coming back for more. The blurring can both entertain and perturb, but either way it raises questions about the challenges confronting media consumers in trying to navigate a complex world.

Tom Ruffles

★★★★★

Occult-Nazi fact and fantasy

A new study into just how much the Nazis were really into the occult exposes mystical myths, says **David Hambling**

The Occult in National Socialism

The Symbolic, Scientific, and Magical Influences on the Third Reich

Stephen E Flowers

Inner Traditions 2022

Pb, 544pp, £26, ISBN 9781644115749

Everybody knows how deeply the Nazis were into the occult; between Indiana Jones, the Hellboy franchise, Captain America's foes Hydra and video games from Wolfenstein onwards, Occult-Nazi lore has now seeped into every corner by sheer osmosis. These pop culture takes are derived from 1960s "non-fiction" bestsellers like *The Spear of Destiny* and *Morning of the Magicians*, which in turn draw on sensational memoirs and post-war attempts to literally demonise the Nazis. Stephen Flowers bravely attempts to hack through this jungle to get to the facts buried beneath a luxuriant growth of fiction.

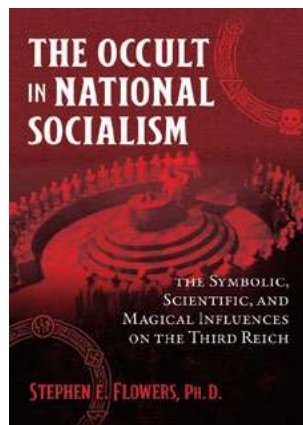
Nazism is at its roots mystical, with a fundamental belief in the specialness of the German people or *Volks* and a core philosophy of "blood and soil" in which the Germans are a single race irrevocably linked to a specific area. This is no different from any other nation's belief in its uniqueness, except that German identity was deliberately constructed before and during the period of German unification. A people needs a mythology, which was duly assembled. It was the life's work of the Brothers Grimm to establish a German folklore, while Wagner was committed to music for the cultural rebirth of the German people. He was not just accidentally a Nazi favourite.

By the early 20th century Germany was a hotbed of nationalist "New Thought", covering everything from gymnastics and naturism through astrology, theosophy and a profusion of esoteric groups, all trying to realise the potential of a new Germany.

Flowers shows how these did not form a single picture but a vast mosaic of contrasting and often conflicting forces at work.

An extensive cast of characters like pagan revivalist Guido von List, racial theorist and mystic Hans von Liebenfels, religious painter Ludwig Fahrenkrog, stage magician Erik Jan Hanussen and spy and occultist Rudolf von Sebottendorf are all covered in detail and put in perspective, many having grown to larger than life size.

Otto Rahn, "the Nazi Grail hunter", is described as a "footnote in the history of Nazi occultism". Rahn travelled Europe exploring Cathar sites as part of the Ahnenerbe, Himmler's SS organisation for the study of German prehistory, which is



shown here to be less of an occult bureau as sometimes depicted and more an assemblage of eccentric scholars.

Flowers's guided tour also cruises through topics as diverse as homeopathy, runes, the OTO and "Nazi science". As he is quick to point out, it is less a question of how these influenced Hitler, more a matter of which he picked and chose as being most useful for his purposes. Hitler was a master manipulator, and his choice of the swastika as a symbol, and the focus on giant torchlit parades and other national rituals, might be seen as the working of a type of psy-

chological sorcery. Flowers talks about the "actual practice by the Nazis of magic on a mass scale" and Hitler's ability to mesmerise a crowd through the belief in the power of his own will.

Other senior Nazis, such as Hess and especially Himmler, had a deeper interest in the occult, but for Hitler, psychological manipulation was as far as it went. The Führer had little patience with Himmler's enthusiasms. In particular, he squashed the suggestion that the Protestant and Catholic churches should be replaced with a revived pagan religion. The Church was too well established, and as long it supported the Nazis it was a useful tool. Flowers observes that the Nazis' trademark anti-semitism came from and was fostered by extremist Christians, who swiftly rewrote history to exonerate themselves.

Flowers is equally strong in exploring the roots of Nazi occultism and post-war mythology boom, boosted by characters like American Satanist Anton LaVey. He points out the affliction he calls 'tabloid news syndrome', which ensures that a story will gain mass appeal by invoking Nazis and Satanism, and which guarantees an unending supply of "new" books combining the two.

Flowers recognises the volume of material that has gone before and that he is just adding another book to the Occult-Nazi shelf. He does give a helpful annotated bibliography of previous works though, which points out in no uncertain terms which are based on solid scholarship and which should be filed under fantasy. There is no doubting the depth of his research or his commitment.

If you only read one book on Nazism and the Occult, and want something which is more on the historical, objective and well-researched line than Indiana Jones, then this has to be a strong contender.

★★★★★

Imaginary Animals

The Monstrous, The Wondrous and the Human

Boria Sax

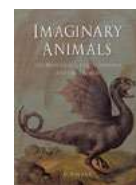
Reaktion Books 2022

Pb, 278pp, £20, ISBN 9781789145458

This beautifully illustrated book is an attractive trip into the symbolism, folklore and politics of fantastic creatures.

The first chapter, on the unicorn, orients the beast within Christian belief and art, with little mention of any zoological inspiration. This focus on our cultural depiction of animals carries throughout the book. We construct our ideas of what it means to be human, Sax says, through our encounters with animals.

This book ventures close to explaining why our monsters (even today's cryptids) are often human-animal hybrids (apeman, dogman, lizard man, mermaids). Those that aren't outwardly human-like, such as the dragon, become many things across time, thus making zoological assessments pointless. Similar consideration is provided for mer-



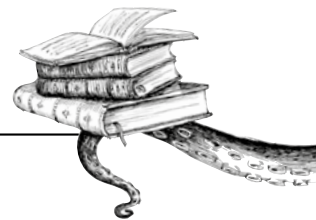
maids, unicorns and shapeshifters.

For some cultures, the difference between real animals and imaginary ones is unimportant; it is considered so only within the materialism of science. The pelts-and-paws cryptid enthusiasts might be disappointed to find only a philosophical treatment of creatures like Bigfoot and sea serpents, or folklore favourites such as griffins, mermaids and werewolves. You won't find mention of a genuine encounter with a windigo, or cattle ranches plagued by a skinwalker in this examination of fantastic creatures. But there is much to consider to enlighten us about why we can't help but bestow human-like traits on our monsters. The great monsters of myth and legend are inspired by nature but ultimately shaped by our human needs.

Some arguable and unsourced statements made me wonder how solid the research was. Regardless, examination of imaginary animals to help demarcate and define our humanity is a worthy process to undertake.

Sharon A Hill

★★★★★



SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

DAVID V BARRETT ROUNDS UP THE LATEST TITLES FROM THE WORLD OF SPECULATIVE AND FANTASTIC FICTION

The Green Man of Eshwood Hall

Jacob Kerr

Serpent's Tail 2022

Hb, 212pp, £14.99, ISBN 9781800811492

Strange, disturbing, sometimes disorientating and more than a bit scary, with strong mythological elements, *The Green Man of Eshwood Hall* is the essence of folk horror. Izzy is 13; she has just moved with her family, in 1962, to Eshwood Hall in Northalbion, a mythical version of Northumberland, where her father will be a general handyman for the old lady who lives there. She has an eight-year-old sister and a baby brother, and her mother is domineering and selfish; she claims to have heart trouble, so Izzy has to do all the cooking and cleaning and looking after the baby, to constant sniping from her mother. In an old deserted chapel in the woods Izzy encounters a large figure made of twigs and leaves, and over the months forms a bond with the Green Man, leading to a shocking conclusion. The story has a strange narrative style: although it's written in the third-person, each character has a distinctive prose voice. Beautifully written, this is Jacob Kerr's first novel, and the first in a series of folk-horror novels; I look forward to the next.



send review copies to Britain, but they kindly sent PDFs of the whole thing. And it's wonderful. As well as one-offs by all three brothers, there were two main strands in the comics over the years. Jaime's stories are known as *Locas* (Spanish: "crazy women"): Maggie and Hopey, 40 years ago, were two Mexican-American punk teenagers living in Hoppers, a fictional suburb of Oxnard, California, where the Hernandez brothers are from; we share in their adventures (or more usually misadventures) with their friends, their love relationships and, most profoundly, their growing up over the years into middle-age, with different problems but still, at heart, the punk kids we fell in love with decades ago. Gilbert's stories were initially

based in Palomar, a fictional Central-American village. Again, through the years, we watched small kids playing in the dirt becoming teenagers and then adults, with kids of their own; the developing and shifting relationships between them built into a huge,

complex, overlapping family saga. The main adult character at the beginning was the hammer-wielding Luba, who ran the bathhouse and becomes mayor of the village; decades on, Gilbert's stories change to follow the lives of Luba's half-sisters, especially Fritz, the lisping psychotherapist and B-movie film star. And throughout the years, these apparently mundane characters from both writers had gloriously OTT SF adventures as well. *L&R* is one of the longest-lasting and certainly one of the greatest-ever comic series, and well worth celebrating.

What Not

Rose Macaulay

MIT Press 2022

Pb, 211pp, £14.43, ISBN 9780262544306

In MIT Press's Radium Age series from just before the Golden Age of science fiction, *What Not* by Rose Macaulay was written during, but set just after, the Great War, when the British

Government has brought in eugenic laws restricting who you can marry: only people of your own intellectual level. Macaulay's alphabetical caste system, from A down to C3, clearly influenced Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, published 14 years later. The Government also imposes mind-training programmes to raise the intellectual level of the population. It's dystopian fiction, at times a feminist dark comedy, and at heart a love story. Senior civil servant Kitty Grammont falls in love with her boss Nicholas Chester, the Minister for Brains, but they can't marry: she is classed as an A but he is unclassified because, though intelligent himself, his twin sister is "deficient". But Kitty, modelled on the author, doesn't care for petty restrictions on her life, and embarks on an affair with him. For an often dark story, this has some lovely humorous moments.

Illuminations

Alan Moore

Bloomsbury 2022

Hb, 456pp, £20, ISBN 9781526643155

It's astonishing that Alan Moore has never had a short story collection until now; but *Illuminations* is a very mixed bag. There are a few excellent stories, by far the best being about a solicitor observing huge apparitions in the sky as she prepares to show someone around a house bequeathed to him by a charitable trust – and if you know any unusual religious history, the moment you see that the house is in Bedford it's no surprise when the someone (or Someone) tells her to call him Jez... For yes, it's the Second Coming, and the Panacea Society, devoted to the prophecies of Joanna Southcott, have had the house waiting for Jesus (who turns out to be a very ordinary, and quite randy guy) for many years. And then there's a fun story about a paranormal study group of people we all might recognise, the Committee for Surrealist Investigation of Claims of the Normal, holding their fortnightly meeting, where

they are infiltrated by non-humans. The weakest piece in the book is also the longest, a 240-page sprawling parody of the comics industry in which Moore eviscerates its editors and publishers as incompetent, self-serving and deeply unpleasant characters. In his notes at the end he says it "exploded like a lanced boil"; it was clearly a rant he needed to write – but it really didn't need to be published.

The Remembrancer's Tale

David Zindell

HarperVoyager 2023

Pb, 550pp, £8.99, ISBN 9780008495695

Discussing space opera in *New Scientist* some 30 years ago I mentioned "the brilliant *Neverness*, in which David Zindell writes of interstellar mathematics in poetic prose that is a joy to read"; it was reading that novel that showed me that pure mathematics is not only a language but, in the intricate calculations of interstellar pilots, can be beautiful poetry. Zindell's latest, *The Remembrancer's Tale*, is set in the same universe. Thomas Rane is the Lord Remembrancer;

he can recall memories so deeply that he relives the experiences viscerally. But as he stands on the icefields of the city of Neverness at the funeral of his lover Maria, he finds he can't remember her death, or seeing her body. Maria was beautiful, a poet

who enchanted all who knew her with her warmth. Initially, Rane skates the coloured ice-roads of Neverness, searching its seediest areas for her, believing she might be looking for new experiences; then he hires a pilot-poet to take him in a lightship deep into space, in the hope that the Solid State Entity, a being with god-like powers, might be able to recreate Maria from his memories of her. David Zindell is an astonishing writer, able to delve deeply into philosophy, spirituality and eroticism – and poetry – in a compellingly readable and utterly believable world very different from our own.



Love and Rockets The First Fifty: The Classic 40th Anniversary Collection

Gilbert, Jaime & Mario Hernandez

Fantagraphics 2022

Box set, hb, 2200pp, \$400, ISBN 9781683965541

It's 40 years since brothers Gilbert, Jaime and to a lesser extent Mario, known as Los Bros Hernandez, launched their comic *Love and Rockets*, and publisher Fantagraphics are celebrating this with a seven-volume box set containing complete facsimiles of the first 50 issues of the comic, up to 1996, with a mass of bonus material in an eighth volume. Because it's huge and expensive they weren't able to

Looking for Bigfoot

A cryptid-centric collection this month, with two new Sasquatch documentaries from Small Town Monsters and a chance to catch Channel 4's The Bigfoot Files; plus, Ti West's latest horror gem



Beyond the Trail: The Alaskan Coastal Sasquatch, Part One

Dir Aleksandar Petakov, US 2022
Small Town Monsters YouTube channel

Seth Breedlove's Small Town Monsters series has created an impressive roster of documentary films tackling everything from Champ to Mothman and even UFOs; but it is relic hominins that seem to be their bread and butter. The STM films are distinguished by beautiful cinematography and a level-headed approach that avoids the sensationalism that mars many other offerings in the genre.

Aleksandar Petakov has featured in the films several times, mounting expeditions, often on his own, into deep wilderness in search of Sasquatch. As a field cryptozoologist, I always admire those who get their boots dirty, physically searching for their quarry rather than just sitting in front of their computers and pontificating. Aleksandar is not one of the latter, as this film

The vocalisations include a siren-like wail and noises like a baby crying

makes very clear.

He was contacted in 2021 by a man named Scott who had built a cabin in a very remote area of coastal Alaska. He and others working on the building heard weird vocalisations, experienced rocks being hurled at the cabin and found a massive, man-like track close by. The vocalisations included a loud, siren-like wail rising in volume, eerie noises like a baby crying, grunting and odd chattering that sounded like some kind of proto-language. They are, says Aleksandar, some of the most interesting he's ever heard.

Aleksandar and two friends, Ron Reid and Eli Watson, join Scott at the cabin after a long journey. The location is the Kaini Peninsula, dubbed 'Area A' by the team, and the remoteness of the cabin means they have to get

there by boat. The peninsula puts the vastness of Alaska on show – majestic, savage and truly the back of beyond. An hour from the nearest habitation, it is a land of deep forests, glaciers, fjords and towering mountains. If a population of relic hominins could live anywhere in North America, it would surely be here.

Exploring the area, Aleksandar and his team find an old abandoned cabin, locked up tight in the forest. At night they record odd sounds. At one

point, they set out to explore a glacier, but eventually have to turn back due to the distance involved and the presence of bears (wildlife abounds here; one day a group of humpbacked whales swims into the fjord). Scott shows them a recording on a thermal camera that may be something lurking behind a tree and peering out. Attempts to recreate the film with one of the team hiding behind a tree fall somewhat short.

They try and attract the hominins with a mirror left in the forest. Thus far, the cameras have picked up nothing, but the film is only the first part of a two-volume set. The next part is teased, and the suggestion is that things will begin to get stranger.

This is well worth a look, not just for the great views of nature, but for the hard work of the people actively involved in trying to uncover Sasquatch evidence. I'm intrigued to see what unfolds in part two.

Richard Freeman



On the Trail of Bigfoot: Last Frontier

Dir Seth Breedlove, USA 2023
Available on dual format disc from www.smalltownmonsters.com/

With *On the Trail of Bigfoot: Last Frontier*, the latest instalment in the increasingly inaccurately named Small Town Monsters documentary series, prolific filmmaker Seth Breedlove trains his lens and army of drone cameras on the vast wilderness of Alaska.

Somewhat surprisingly, given its geographical proximity and similarity to another Bigfoot hot spot, the Pacific Northwest, yet also unsurprisingly, because of its size and overall remoteness, Alaska remains largely untapped as an area of serious Bigfoot research. Breedlove finds ample potential for Bigfoot to survive and thrive despite the inhospitable climate and geography that renders much of Alaska uninhabitable for most people and wildlife. Indeed, it is its sparse human population and therefore overall absence of potential witnesses that has led Alaska to be largely overlooked as a Bigfoot stomping ground, more so than its extreme environments. Breedlove and his team do their best to fill in the gaps with the usual evidence – the baby cries, howls, whoops, and tree knocks familiar to Bigfoot researchers – and obligatory eyewitness accounts, primarily from Indigenous peoples.

While some of the evidence presented in the documentary intrigues, there is an absence of drama that makes this instalment feel somewhat underwhelming. As you'd expect with Breedlove and crew, the footage they have assembled inspires awe and effectively provides the viewer with a sense



TELEVISION

FT's very own couch potato, STU NEVILLE, casts an eye over the small screen's current forteen offerings



Mentioned in passing in this column last year, *The Bigfoot Files* was originally shown on Channel 4 in 2013, and features Mark Evans, Prof Brian Sykes and Sykes's disappointing and/or surprising DNA results. It's now available on Prime and worth a watch if you haven't seen it.

Episode 1 sees Evans in the Himalayas on the trail of the Yeti (cue prayer wheels, lamas and Yaks, the Shipton print etc). "It's judgement day for the Yeti!" says Evans, a tad prematurely. A quick troll through the usual suspects, with helpful silhouettes of a bear, a gibbon, a human and a Yeti, and the various names given to it in different areas. Evans, in his huge anorak and sunglasses

before a sheer Nepalese cliff face, introduces Prof Brian Sykes in his Oxford garret, tweedily scrutinising slides. No time to waste as Evans helicopters off to Namche Bazaar to meet Sherpas, specifically Sona Hisha Sherpa who encountered a Yeti as a teen. Sherpa the Sherpa, whose disconcerting attire of a bright red fleece, lumberjack shirt and flat cap make him look more like a market-stall greengrocer, tells of how, having been caught in a storm, he sheltered in a cave and a Yeti made off with

Messner resembles a lost BeeGee with a bouffant and snowy eyebrows

two of the cattle he was tending, leaving only "shit and intestines" behind (a phrase I've adopted for future use).

Cut to Prof Sykes in the Tyrol for a shufti at Ernst Schaeffer's stuffed Yeti (John Peel memes ahoy). While on a Nazi jaunt in the Himalayas to prove that the Aryan race was originally Tibetan, Schaeffer bagged a weird bear/baboon hybrid that now resides in the home of the eminent climber Reinhold Messner, who relates the story of his own Yeti encounter (cue stills of him resembling a lost BeeGee with bouffant and snowy eyebrows). He sighted one on the opposite bank of a river, though he qualifies this by saying it was twilight and through foliage. Sykes shaves some fur from the beast for analysis back at the lab, and comparison with other odd hair-samples collected in Bhutan and Nepal. Messner also photographed footprints that look like the Shipton

print, and so Evans takes the opportunity to test the "two-step" theory (that a bear's front and back pawprints superimpose to look like an anthropoid print) resulting in a surprisingly similar result.

Back to Blighty and the surprising verdict that while nothing viable came from Messner's specimen, the other samples were – spoiler alert – an archaic form of polar bear, which is downright odd. The other two episodes, covering the North American Bigfoot and Russian Almasty also hold surprises: not least revelations about Zana the captured "wild-woman" from the Caucasus and an identification of the "Bigfoot steak" from a creature putatively shot by Justin Smeja in 2010. It's also instructive to see the differing attitudes to research in the field as well, and while ultimately it finds no overall smoking gun, it adds more pieces to the puzzle.

of the vast impenetrability and mystery of this mostly unexplored landscape and the impression that, given all of this space, surely there must be something unknown out there. Alaska has long held a mystique as the final outpost of the Age of Discovery, and the last vestige of the undiscovered. It is therefore as good a place as any for an unknown hominid to go undetected by the modern world.

Eric Hoffman



Pearl

Dir Ti West, USA 2022
On UK general release

With *The House of the Devil*, Ti West showed that he has a knack for setting films in decades past and making them look like they come straight

out of the era in question. This was also the case with *X*, a subversive horror film set in late 1970s Texas, where a crew of adult filmmakers rent a building on a remote farm to shoot their next feature. When the trailer was released, many assumed the film would merely be another *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* rip-off; however, as those who have seen *X* will largely agree, it's a fun and subversive horror romp with a solid mix of humour, gore and some original narrative twists. And this is where I should warn you to stop reading if you have yet to watch it, as I cannot discuss *Pearl* without spoiling *X* to some extent. Still here? Let's continue.

The eponymous film centres around the origins of the main antagonist of *X*, and where *X* subverted horror tropes, *Pearl* is a loopy Technicolor fantasy

that tells the story of how a delusional and disturbed country girl with dreams of being a star turns into a serial killer as she gradually lets her dark side take over when her dreams are extinguished one by one.

Filmed in a manner that seeks to emulate the style of old Hollywood, the visuals are vibrant and bold, which in turn makes the rare but well-executed gore pop that much more as Pearl goes further and further off the rails. The underlying tone is unsettling, but the viewer is also invited to feel sympathy for Pearl, which may seem like a tall order, considering the joy she finds in killing, but the character is nonetheless compelling in her inherent sadness. This is in no small part thanks to Mia Goth being allowed to run wild with her stunning portrayal of Pearl and invite the audience

to invest in the character. It's clear that Goth and West have tapped into something special here, and the monologue towards the end of the film stands out in particular with its simultaneously tragic and disturbing insights into Pearl's mind.

A third film has been announced, and it will be exciting to see if Goth and West can maintain the momentum from *Pearl*, as this origin story stands out as not only one of the best horror films of recent years, but as one of the best and most original recent films in any genre. Hopefully, *Maxxxine* will deliver a spectacular climax to cement Goth and West's trilogy as a particularly memorable entry in the annals of horror movie history.

Leyla Mikkelsen



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Christmas truce

The unofficial Christmas truce of 1914 certainly did occur [Myth-conceptions #263, **FT426:19**]. In her book *1914-1918: Voices and Images of the Great War*, Lyn Macdonald, the noted historian of WW1, quotes Lieut. Johannes Niemann of the 133rd Royal Saxon Regiment. Niemann describes an hour-long football match between British and German troops, initiated by a Scottish soldier, which ended in a 3:2 victory for Germany.

The same page quotes an account from Gunner Herbert Smith, 5th Battalion, Royal Field Artillery, detailing meetings between British and German soldiers to exchange cigarettes for German cigars. The practice was widespread enough that senior British officers felt compelled to issue orders prior to Christmas 1915 specifically stating that the “unauthorised truce” of Christmas 1914 was not to be repeated, (for example, see Lt. Col. B Burnett Hitchcock of the General Staff, 47th (London) Division as quoted in Macdonald’s *1915: The Death of Innocence*, Chapter 38).

Scott Leckey

By email

What about the whistle?

The review of ‘Ghost Stories For Christmas, Vol 1’ [**FT426:54**] states that the screen adaptation ‘Whistle And I’ll Come To You’ (directed by Andy de Emmony, and starring John Hurt) dates from 1980. This is wrong. It was 2010. I remember watching it at the time. It was the first version of the story I’d come across – and while it was scary, I felt depressed by the dark ending and also let down by the lack of a proper explanation as to why John Hurt’s character was being haunted, regardless of the discovered ring (and why does his wife disappear at the end?). Also, where was the whistle, as per the title? It was too bleak, and a case of too much departure from the original story.

Carl Gudgeon

Wigston, Leicestershire



Spooky lights

These photos were taken by a psychotherapist friend of mine, Damian, at Nidd Hall, near Harrogate, on the 13 August 2022; the one with the path was taken at 23.39 and the other at 23.36. Both show a strange light, though the one set against the trees

is possibly a lens flare; the other, captured on the path, is more difficult to explain. Damian didn’t notice the lights at the time of taking the photographs, and there is nothing in adjacent shots. Any ideas?

Percy Aggett

By email

Hawks and jellyfish

Checking my FT back issues, I was surprised to see our Harris hawks had reached the UK from the USA, and was afraid they were one of our unwanted gifts to you, like our grey squirrels – but Wikipedia says they are “escapees from falconry”. Do they hunt in packs now, as they do here in the States? I saw that in my own backyard here in Tucson, Arizona.

Four beautiful hawks were on my roof. Their eyes were on my chihuahua, who was sniffing under bushes and didn’t notice them. Three peeled off and settled in a tree close to the dog, while the fourth burrowed into the bushes as far as it could, and shrieked into the dog’s ear, trying to flush her out so that

the other three could get her. And that’s exactly what would have happened if I hadn’t been home to yell at them. People with small pets have to be careful here!

• Every time the huge jellyfish *Cyanea capillata* (The Lion’s Mane) shows up in FT, I half expect you to mention the time Sherlock Holmes tangled with one. He had retired to the seashore. Two of his friends encountered the creature in a tide pool; one died from the stings and the other was just barely saved. The jellyfish then hid, and even Holmes was at a loss to explain the strange ‘whip marks’ on the men’s skin. Finally he remembers a book he had read, *Out of Doors* by the naturalist JG Wood (a real book, published in 1874.) Wood himself nearly died from his encounter with the jel-

lyfish. Holmes and a policeman manage to squish the monster under a rock. You can find the story in *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, in the chapter ‘The Lion’s Mane’.

Leslie Vinson

Tucson, Arizona

Baal is king

Apropos the delightful Google translate circus prompted by the (very ill-chosen) Balenciaga ad campaign [see “Demons in bondage”, **FT427:4**] – well, I had to give it a go didn’t I? With, I think, interesting results.

Ba Len Ci Aga, as you said, directs you to Hausa, but came up with “I don’t eat aga” rather than “Do what you like”. In Latin, Baal enci aga did indeed translate as “Baal is the King”, but on its own Enci Aga produced “Act like an angel”! (Me neither). While Enci Aga, according to Google, translates from Spanish as “turn on”. I am familiar with Latin and Spanish and can see no similarities with either language from any variation of Balenciaga; maybe the app is turning into a kind of online I-Ching, Tarot or Rune cosmic consultation system where random input produces gnomonic messages?

Hours of innocent fun!

Tony Purcell

Sheffield, South Yorkshire

Hexham Heads

In 1976, I suffered a nervous breakdown. It was during that famous long hot summer and my sympathetic editor bought and lent me for reading material *Folklore Myths & Legends of Britain*. It was a revelation and a treasure trove, almost closed the door of my antiquarianism, but expanded wonderment at our rich tapestry of folklore. Maurice Brady admitted the book arrived at the *Hartlepool Mail* as a review copy and he had put it on his personal office bookshelf and never opened it. When he died it mysteriously bilocated to my house in Seaton Carew again.

Earlier, during 1972, I had been collecting cuttings from regional newspapers regarding

LETTERS

the 'Hexham Heads' discovery, haunting and debacle between Celtic scholar Dr Anne Ross and local creator claimant Des Craigie. I visited the site of discovery in 1977, wrote a 17-page booklet (Taras Young sought permission later to publish a hardback edition of only two copies) and subsequently in 2010 a full-length exploration for CFZ Publications. However, *Folklore Myths & Legends* gave the first account of werewolf involvement chez Ross and full-on forteen endorsement.

What was not featured in FT's excellent homage to the Readers' Digest compilation [FT427:28-35] was the effect on teenage viewers watching the relevant episode of *Nationwide* broadcast, where Dr Ross recalled for reporter Luke Casey the scary man-beast observed and heard at her Southampton home after the Hexham Heads were introduced into the household. I recall I was mesmerised and inspired. Others' shocked sensibilities marked this as Haunted Generation gold.

Lastly, the article suggests that the original Hexham Heads' whereabouts are unknown. Their last guardian, Frank Wilsenham Hyde, passed away on 22 March 1984. Eventually, I was put in touch with his daughter, Ionne Hammond, in a small Suffolk village. She and her husband spent several days clearing Frank's flat and when I began inquiries she looked the Hexham Heads up on

the Internet and assures me nothing resembling them was found.

If they can generate a quasi-corporeal manimal, they can look after themselves. Billy Rough's photograph (p.33) has me holding a lighter demonstration 'Celtic' head made by Des Craigie and the gruesome school project head made by finder Colin Robson.

Paul Screeton

Seaton Carew, Co Durham

Precognition, talking dogs

- Clive Watson makes some good points about Wodewoses and cave-men [FT428:63]. I think the image of the primitive-looking caveman bearing a club (and often dragging a very un-primitive-looking woman by the hair), is an outdated (and misogynistic) view of our ancient ancestors, who would most likely be indistinguishable from 21st century people, given the same setting. I think the club is just the most primitive weapon illustrators could depict, and is in keeping with the supposed brute-strength of the caveman. Perhaps the same reasoning applies to the illustrations of Wodewoses.

- I was interested to read the letter from Marinus van der Sluijs, regarding very old people, and entirely agree with his doubts [FT428:64]. He quotes Clyde Edgar Keeler, regarding a woman "of one hundred and forty years

of age". Although, as Marinus states, Keeler's medical expertise appears to give the claim some authority, Keeler himself states that "age was still dealing more kindly with her than with most people in their seventies", which strongly suggests that he (Keeler) is accepting the longevity claim without any medical evidence.

Moreover, Keeler states: "It is well known that Indians usually do not get white hair until after the age of one hundred." This seems a rather unprovable statement, and I am sure that many supposed super-centenarians are simply people who have adopted a parent's or grandparent's identity – or have simply put back their birth year by a few decades – for various reasons.

- Regarding Precognitive Dreams [FT428:66], I wouldn't presume to judge Roger Musson's experience – only he really knows what it was like. I do believe, however, that our perception of coincidence plays a large part in our beliefs about precognition. In my opinion, if you dream of an unusual incident, and the next day something along those lines occurs, you are likely to recall the dream, whereas if nothing occurs to remind you of it, you are unlikely to recall it. Regarding animals anticipating natural disasters, I think this is simply evidence of their vastly superior senses compared to humans, combined with their evolved instincts.

- As always, Peculiar Postcards was excellent. I am sure the talking dogs [FT428:68-69] were talked up a bit (pun intended), but I am equally sure they were able to convey an approximation of various words, although I think that knowing in advance what the dog was trying to say would have aided the audience's comprehension. I myself encountered a talking cat, when I used to work in a large Hampshire village. I would go on regular walks on my lunch break, and often petted the local felines. One day as I was strolling along, I saw one of my cat friends walking towards me. I said "Hello" in a sort of baby-talk voice, and the cat seemed to reply with the same intonation, which was not like a regular "meow", but as if it was repeating my greeting as closely as it could. I repeated my greeting, and the cat replied the

same way. This never occurred again, but I know the cat knew I was friendly, and I am convinced that on that one occasion it recognised a friendly human greeting, and deliberately copied it.

Dave Miles

By email

Which book?

When I was aged about eight or nine (1964/1965), I was given an illustrated Christmas book which purported to cover all the unexplained mysteries of the world. I can only recall two stories from it.

The first was the disappearance of David Lang, now a well-known hoax (but not back then), that allegedly occurred on 23 September 1880, when he supposedly vanished into thin air while walking through a field near his home. His wife, children, and two men who were passing by in a buggy all allegedly witnessed his disappearance and his children could hear him calling for some days afterwards. That story first appeared in *Stranger Than Science* (1959), but that was not the book.

However, the story that I am interested in was as follows: When they were laying a telephone cable between Eire and England some time I presume to be in the 1920s or 1930s (I can't recall the exact dates; it may have been much later such as the 1950s), there was a diving bell sent down to survey the Irish sea bed for a safe passage. The occupants were shocked to see brand new giant footprints on the sea bed, slowly filling with sediment. The implication was that some great sea beast or dinosaur survivor had just passed by, minutes before their arrival. The image that accompanied the tale was of a diver's bell with two men staring at a sea bed lit up by their lights, with brontosaurus-size (it was a different time), footprints visible in the waters.

The book was lost long ago, and I can't recall its name, which is a shame as it was full of other wonders that fired an eight-year-old boy's imagina-



Leicester Terrapins?

I cycle Leicester's canal/river system a lot, and much to my surprise today [14 Oct 2022] I saw a terrapin basking on a log. Is this a flushed pet, or an invasive species now flourishing due to the warming climate of the UK? **Ross Withers, Leicester**

tion, and sparked a lifetime interest in fortaean subjects. Has any reader ever come across this story, or seen the book in question?

Andy Kelly

Fylde Coast, Lancashire

Lajos Pap's trickery

I was envious of Ian Simmons's trip to Paris to see the exhibition *Phenomena: The Unexplained in the Face of Science* [FT427:14-15], and it would be wonderful if something similar could be held in the UK. One comment I would take issue with is the claim, presumably derived from a caption, that the Hungarian physical medium Lajos Pap produced séance room phenomena "even under the most stringent conditions".

Certainly the principal investigator Ian names, Elemér Chengery Pap, was convinced by the performances, which were wide-ranging and yielded enough apports (objects supposedly transported into the séance room by paranormal means) to literally fill a museum. There were, however, others who reached different conclusions concerning Lajos Pap's honesty. Their accounts indicate that conditions, far from being stringent, were often turbulent and enabled fraud to occur.

Theodore Besterman sat with Lajos Pap in Budapest during a four-month tour of the Continent in 1928, which he described in the SPR's *Proceedings*. He became suspicious that the medium was generating phenomena by normal means, confirmed when he witnessed Lajos Pap holding the leg of a supposedly levitating table after a light was inadvertently switched on.

Then in 1935 Nandor Fodor brought Lajos Pap and Chengery Pap to London for a series of 10 séances at the International Institute for Psychical Research, recounted in an entertaining report Fodor wrote for the IIPR, *The Lajos Pap Experiments*. Again, there was overwhelming evidence that Lajos Pap cheated and Chengery Pap, acting in good faith, had been hoodwinked. Fodor concluded that "none of the phenomena produced in London can be considered supernormal; some of them were definitely



Fluffy Ouija

Michael Holt sent in this photograph of a cute Ouija board.

fraudulent, others highly suspicious."

In a similar vein, more recently Michael Nahm concluded in his lengthy analysis 'Out of Thin Air? Apport Studies Performed between 1928 and 1938 by Elemér Chengery Pap' that his "research approach contained remarkable loopholes." Any statement suggesting that Lajos Pap could not have cheated must be treated with scepticism as, contrary to the impression given in the Paris exhibition, his behaviour precluded strict controls being imposed.

Tom Ruffles

Impington, Cambridge

Seat of consciousness

Regarding the Artificial Intelligence speculations of Alex Kashko [FT423:61], I would like to remind readers of a quotation from the famous physicist Erwin Schrödinger, that "There is only one consciousness, and the differentiations are an illusion" – which is redolent of Einstein's "The distinctions between past, present and future are an illusion, however persistent." It's not to everyone's taste to resurrect a kind of Ayahuasca-drenched, DMT-apotheosis-promoting, Alan Watts-style discursion of mysticism, but the suggestion here is that computers may *never* achieve consciousness, and that consciousness is the preserve of

organic life. Then there are the chaotic influences of memory span and neurosurgery to consider.

Consciousness is so vaguely defined, and so to consider that Carl Sagan defines humanity as "The Universe's way of experiencing Itself" evokes an image of some overarching Matrix or Akashic records, some kind of vague uber-consciousness, that reels through every human experience until the end of time. Ultimately, one is left with a gnawing sense that nothing can really be measured or proved in the domain of mental qualia, and so it is equally likely that Yann Martell's 'Life of Pi' description is accurate, that all you get is a 'peep-hole' onto the Universe, and anything more would be self-delusion. But philosophy has its consolations, and even if consciousness is futile in the face of the decimation of organised religion, at least the modern world offers the comfort that, now we've discovered thousands of exoplanets, with good odds many are inhabited, at least there's a lot more consciousness in the Universe than we previously thought.

So, when it comes to AI, all that can be hoped for is increasingly sophisticated dialogue replicated, achieving higher and higher scores on the Turing Test, but being

no less soulless automata for that, since that's a limitation of the Turing Test. The Turing Test was invented at a time when there seemed no hope of it ever being defeated, and so a more robust test has yet to be devised.

James Wright

Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex

Fairy coins

I didn't know Roman coins were known as fairy coins [FT428:29], but they used to be carried as good luck charms by farm workers in my neck of the woods (Doris Jones-Baker, *The Folklore of Hertfordshire* (1977), p.34). They may still be. In the remote north-east of the county, as W Branch Johnson wrote in 1952, "The older folk (or some of them) still retain a traditional half-belief in fairies – pharisees, they call them – and, when you have gained their confidence, will point out a fairy bakehouse in a field at Furneaux Pelham..." (*Companion into Hertfordshire*, p.90). To this day such folklore survives around this village (see the greatbritish-life website for October 2014), often involving 'fairy stones', the heart-shaped fossils of the micraster echinoid, which could be mistaken for coins. My father and I used to walk a lot in this area, and one day about 40 years ago, near a deserted site called Wateringplace Green, we found an exquisite worked microlith, thousands of years old, lying in a cornfield. It was probably an arrowhead, but seen by local people unversed in archaeology, what small beings could it have evoked?

Richard George

St Albans, Hertfordshire



"I have left your parcel in a safe place"

MARTIN ROSS

IT HAPPENED TO ME...

CROSS AT LINDISFARNE

In Sept 2016 my partner Jason and I were holidaying in Spittal, Northumberland, and decided to visit the holy island of Lindisfarne. We parked our car and started to make the trek on foot to Lindisfarne Castle. We made slow progress as I was walking with two walking sticks, which I needed after I had hip surgery a few months earlier. About half way through our walk, Jason suddenly fell on to one knee. As he was getting up I asked if he was OK, and he said, "That was the weirdest thing; I didn't trip – it felt as if I was pulled down to the ground." We stood for a while as he was very shaken, and then we carried on. After having a look around the Castle, we made our way back to Spittal.

At the holiday lodge Jason went straight to the bathroom, took his trousers off and shouted to me that his knee had been bleeding. He cleaned it with warm water and then shouted "Oh my God, come and have a look at my knee." On his knee is an inverted tattooed cross that he tattooed himself when he was young and daft (it looks the right way up to him when he looks down at it). However, next to this tattoo is a cross up the right way.

Perhaps the monks weren't too keen on his tattooed cross. We are going to Spittal again this year but Jason doesn't seem too keen to revisit Lindisfarne.

Debra Dumbleton
By email

PHOTO SURPRISE

I live in the small Cornish seaside town of Looe, having moved from Birmingham 20 years ago, and volunteer in the local museum. If an interesting photo is posted to our Facebook page or other community and local history groups, we save the image for our digital archive.

Recently a photo of Looe quayside and harbour circa



1975 appeared. It was a fairly uninspiring image of the river at high tide. Dominating the centre and right-hand side is the water and boats with three groups of people on the quay on the left side: three women chatting, a father and daughter quay-side crab fishing and my grandparents (Nan & Bampus) walking straight towards the viewer. The jolt of recognition I felt was like an electric shock. They lived in Birmingham, so were obviously on holiday and just happened to be strolling along when the photographer took the picture.

I emailed it to my sister who still lives in Birmingham but is familiar with Looe, and asked her "What do you think of this photo?". She immediately replied: "What are Nan & Bampus doing in that old photo!?" She showed it to her 18-year-old son, whose first response was "That lady looks like Nanny Barbara" (our mother, Nan's daughter). They were both long gone before he was born, but he spotted the family resemblance at once.

We know it is just a coinci-

"PERHAPS THE MONKS WEREN'T TOO KEEN ON HIS TATTOOED CROSS"

dence, blind luck that I now live in a place they visited decades ago and accidentally had their photo taken, which years later gets posted onto a site I look at for research. It was lovely to see them enjoying themselves in a town they never knew I would end up living in. I feel comforted by the image, as if they just popped down for a visit to say hello.

Penny McHugh
East Looe, Cornwall

SHOCKING

I have been having some 'shocking' experiences lately. If I flex my lower back, it sends a shock into that region. I went to kick a ball for a dog the other day and the acute pain made my leg go all over the place and missed contact with the ball altogether. Then

last night in the early hours I woke up feeling that I had been electrocuted, as I imagine it felt like to be tasered. Also the left side of my neck was swollen before that and continues to be, cramping my ability to turn my head, left (especially), right or tilt it backwards. On top of this for years I have had odd bouts of static problems, from the usual shocks from plastic-covered handrails to sparks shooting across to my nose, when pulling off jumpers made from synthetic materials. Has anybody else experienced this?

Tony Sandy
By email

EPISTOLARY COMBUSTION

Reading Gail-Nina Anderson's letter about the dreaded Post Office plastic bags containing damaged mail [FT425:65] reminded me of my own fortan postal coincidence. When I was at university about 30 years ago, my dad would forward letters delivered to my home address. One day, he left a bundle of letters for me on top of a gas fire and they fell on to the burners, where they were partly scorched. Luckily, he was able to rescue them and he put them all into one big brown envelope, along with a note explaining what had happened, and sent it to me at college. About a week later, I received a Post Office plastic bag containing the big brown envelope, which now had a corner and parts of two sides burned off. There was a note from the Post Office apologising for the package having been damaged in transit – but no explanation. How had the package managed to catch fire on its way through the postal system? And why had my letters almost gone up in smoke not once but twice? Was this a case of spontaneous epistolary combustion? I wish I could remember after all this time what was in those letters. It must have been something incendiary.

Lisa Gledhill
Goring, Oxfordshire

SIMULAGRA GORNER

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to sieveking@forteantimes.com



This face appeared in Rebecca Mingo's beer on New Year's Eve 2022.



John Hope noticed this ghostly face on his sofa.



Keith Harland spotted this tree face at Fountains Abbey in North Yorkshire.



Professor Jim Thomas spotted "this jolly man sporting a comb-over during a walk through Wyming Brook Nature Reserve to the west of Sheffield." He points out that "there's a little known stone circle about 500 metres away: www.stone-circles.org.uk/stone/ashcabinflat.htm

PECULIAR POSTCARDS



JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past follows the career of the faux-American acrobats who made an art out of falling down

34. THE WERDS BROTHERS



ABOVE LEFT: A card showing the Werds brothers, signed by Charles Werds. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Another card showing the Werds brothers close-up. **BELOW:** This postcard would indicate that at some stage of their career, the Werds Brothers supported a French or Belgian comedienne billed as Mme de Luxe in her performances.

The Werds Brothers, describing themselves as eccentric American acrobats, made their debut at the Palace Theatre, Cork, in February 1909. One of them, the dapper-looking Charles Werds, had already some reputation as a clown and entertainer in Belgium and France; the desperate-looking Gustave Werds specialised in performing various dangerous stunts involving heavy falls on stage. The easily amused provincial theatregoers thought it very funny when the foolhardy Gustave fell into the orchestra pit, before being helped up on stage with his head through a large drum. At Barrasford's Hippodrome in Sheffield, the Werds Brothers "furnished the audience with the means of much merriment"; at the Portsmouth Hippodrome, they "displayed ability as eccentric acrobats"; at the Granville in Fulham, they were described as a pair of American eccentrics, "with many smart tricks and falls, and altogether their act is a most clever one."

The Werds Brothers toured the provinces throughout 1909, 1910 and 1911, being able to keep poverty from the door,

albeit unable to save any money. They were spending beyond their means, and in July 1912, the bankruptcy column of the *London Gazette* contained the following ominous notice: "Werds, Charles and Gustave (trading as the Werds Brothers), of 25 Lisle Street, Leicester Square, music hall performers, first meeting of the High Court of Justice in Bankruptcy July 12, 1912." The following week, the same journal contained the spicy news that the Werds Brothers had been impostors all along: far from being brothers and coming from America, they were the German Carl Hartmann and the Belgian Gustave van Attenhoven, and they were going to face the bankruptcy proceedings under their correct identities.

But the Werds Brothers made a Caledonian comeback later in 1912, visiting Aberdeen and Dundee. Their advertisements boasted that they had performed at the London Hippodrome and Alhambra, and at the Winter Gardens in Berlin. When they acted in the pantomime 'Humpty Dumpty' at His Majesty's Theatre in Dundee, the local newspaper reviewed their act with enthusiasm: "Among the

gentlemen pride of place must be given to the Werds Brothers, whose comic acrobatic display has never been equalled in any local pantomime. Much of their business is simple in the extreme, but it is so ludicrous and so neatly done that old and young alike laugh hugely. Then some of their tricks are marvellously clever, and the fall of one of the brothers from the top of a high ladder keeps the whole house in amused suspense. The turn of the Werds Brothers alone makes the pantomime worth seeing."

In Portsmouth, the Werds Brothers described themselves as "the Creators of the Highest Fall on the Stage"; in Leeds, they raised many a hearty laugh, although the heavy falls of one of them seemed almost too realistic. In 1914, after the outbreak of the Great War, the brothers 're-invented



themselves', gaining sympathy by claiming to be refugees from Brussels in Belgium, and unable to fulfil any engagements in their native land because of the war.

They kept touring throughout 1914, 1915 and 1916; in January 1917, they were at the Leith Alhambra. They then disappeared for more than four years, before resurfacing at the Southend and Portsmouth Hippodromes in July 1921, performing their old act without variation. But since the audience was no longer impressed with their rather repetitive onstage efforts, the Werds Brothers sunk back into obscurity, quite possibly returning to Belgium to spend their declining years in a more congenial atmosphere.

The Brothers WERDS

AMERICAN EXCENTRICS ==



THE MAN WHO FALLS

The Brothers WERDS

AMERICAN EXCENTRICS ==



THE MAN WHO FALLS

WERDS BROS



The Original Comedie act



TOP & ABOVE LEFT: Three French cards with English text, showing the Werds brothers clowning about on stage. ABOVE RIGHT: Gustave Werds falls into the orchestra pit.

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WHY FORTEAN?



FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is

in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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PHENOMENOMIX

CROWLEY COTTAGE

HUNT EMERSON

CARN COTTAGE, ZENNOR, CORNWALL. NOW A RUINED DUMP, IN FORMER TIMES IT WAS A HOLIDAY COTTAGE...



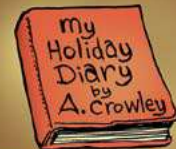
IN 1938 ONE HOLIDAY-MAKER WAS THE GREAT BEAST HIMSELF, ALEISTER CROWLEY!



NATURALLY, EVER SINCE THEN, THE HOUSE IS BELIEVED TO BE HAUNTED, AND LOCAL RUMOUR HAS IT THAT HE HAD CONJURED UP "THE DEVIL!"



BUT WHAT PROOF IS THERE? WAS CROWLEY THERE TO PERFORM A PERVERTED MAGICKAL RITE? OR WAS HE JUST ON HOLIDAY?



HE KEPT CAREFUL DIARIES OF HIS ACTIVITIES, SO LET'S FIND OUT, SHALL WE?

"AUGUST 25th 1938:

THE PLACE IS FULL OF TOURISTS, BUT THIS COTTAGE IS REMOTE. THE PERFECT PLACE TO PREPARE MY BODY AND MIND FOR THE RIGOROUS TESTS TO COME!"



"KNOWING, AS I DO, THAT EXERCISE AND ALCOHOL HELP OPEN THE ENQUIRING MIND TO MESSAGES FROM OUTSIDE, I TOOK A BRISK TWENTY-MILE STROLL ACROSS THE MOOR..."

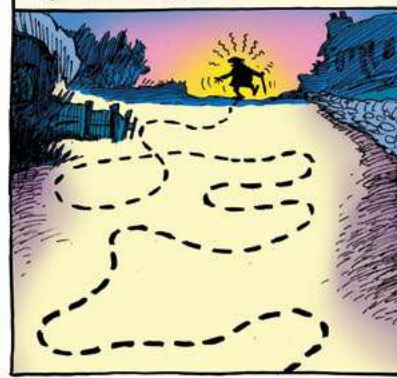


"...TO THE NORTH INN AT PENDEEN,"

"IT'S LIKE A CORNISH PASTY AND TWELVE PINTS OF CIDER, PLEASE!"



"WALKED HOME, CAREFULLY FOLLOWING A WINDING PSYCHIC GHOST PATH."



"BACK AT THE PLACE OF RITUAL I HAD TO WRESTLE WITH A DEMONIC PRESENCE THAT LAY IN WAIT FOR ME! IT HAD CUNNINGLY DISGUISED ITSELF, BUT WAS OBVIOUSLY AN INFERNAL DEVILISH CONTRAPTION!"



"I OVERCAME IT AND, STRENGTHENED BY MY PSYCHIC VICTORY, I OFFERED TWO HOURS WORSHIP TO THE GOD OF THE ANCIENTS: SOL!"



"LATER, A REPAST OF AETHERIAL SWEETMEATS WAS SERVED BY THE SPIRITS THAT HAUNT THIS PLACE.!!



"I FORCED MYSELF TO SWALLOW MORE OF THE MIND-OPENING ELIXIRS..."



"... BEFORE ENTERING THE MAGICKAL SPACE AND BEGINNING THE GREAT WORK!"



"IN THE MORNING, DRAINED BY THE NIGHTS CONJURATIONS, I SILENTLY FLED THIS HIGHLY-CHARGED LANDSCAPE, TO HEAD FOR THE SAFETY OF LONDON!"



why, the old devil hasn't paid his bill!



COMING NEXT MONTH



THE BIRTH OF OF NESSIE

NINETY YEARS OF THE
LOCH NESS MONSTER



THE BLACK VOMIT SAUNA

AND OTHER DISGUSTING
MEDICAL SELF EXPERIMENTS

RICHARD BELZER,
UNEARTHLY FACES,
SUICIDE FOREST
AND MUCH MORE...



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STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

In 2017, bar worker Miyuki Ueta, 49, was sentenced to death for the 2009 killing of two men to whom she owed money. She had drugged and drowned Kazumi Yabea, a 47-year-old truck driver, and Hideki Maruyama, 57, an electronics store owner, in separate incidents, with the court saying that Ueta bore "grave criminal responsibility" after carrying out the premeditated and "cruel crimes based on firm intentions to kill". She was awaiting execution on death row in a Hiroshima prison when she choked on her food while eating a meal in her cell, collapsing and losing consciousness. Guards attempted to dislodge the blockage and resuscitate Ueta, but she died in hospital three hours later. *msn.com*, 17 Jan 2023.

A maintenance worker was crushed to death while working under a telescopic public urinal in Cambridge Circus in London's West End. London has a network of retractable urinals that are raised to street level at night by hydraulics to serve revellers from local bars and nightclubs. The technician was working on the underground mechanism when the device suddenly retracted, trapping him beneath it, and despite the efforts of 25 firefighters who used a winch to release him, the man was pronounced dead at the scene. *BBC News*, 27 Jan 2023.

In Sydney, Australia, police were mystified by two men found dead on couches in the living room of a house in the city's Londonderry suburb. The pair, aged 50 and 63, had spent the evening drinking with another friend at the house. He had retired to bed early, leaving the two others downstairs, and when he awoke the next morning, he found both dead. Police found no signs of violence or forced entry, and no signs that either of the men had become unwell. Neither had a history of drug use and there was no indication of anything that might have poisoned them. Police were hoping that autopsies might shed further light on the mystery. *D.Telegraph (Sydney)*, 7 Nov 2022.

Police searching for a nine-year-old boy who went missing from Sayli village, in Gujarat, India, found his decapitated remains in a canal 20 miles (32km) away. A forensic examination of the body and the suspected murder

weapons, found nearby, led officers to believe the boy had been the victim of a human sacrifice. Intensive investigations led to the arrest of two men and a teenage boy, who admitted having kidnapped the boy from his village and taken him to their accomplices, one of whom was a tantric mystic, and confirmed that they had then sacrificed him in a "ritual to make them rich". *express.co.uk*, 12 Jan 2023.

As well as working as a lawyer in São Paulo, Brazil, Leandro Mathias de Novaes, 40, was an active pro-gun advocate, with 12,000 followers for his weapon-related content on TikTok and Instagram. When he took his mother for an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scan at Laboratorio Cura in the city, he carried his gun as usual, but did not mention this to hospital staff when they told him to remove all metal items before accompanying his mother into the MRI room. However, as soon as the MRI scanner was switched on its powerful magnetic field wrenched the weapon from de Novaes's waistband, causing it to go off, shooting him in the abdomen at close range. Despite all efforts of the São Luiz Morumbi Hospital, he died of his injuries three weeks later. An investigation confirmed that he had been made aware of and agreed to all the safety protocols, but had entered the examination room with the gun "by his own decision". *independent.co.uk*, 10 Feb 2023.

Melody Chiputura, 17, was sitting in a lesson at the Rushinga High School in Zimbabwe when she felt a sting on her thigh. "She immediately cried out, saying that something had bitten her," said Christopher Murenga, the school's principal. This led to her teacher spotting a black mamba under Melody's desk, and while some students fled the room, others pulled her away from the snake and beat the reptile to death. Melody was rushed to hospital but died 20 minutes after she was bitten. Black mambas are among the world's deadliest snakes, and two drops of their venom are enough to kill a person. It is believed the snake got into the classroom while the students were out doing sports, but Murenga said: "We have no idea where this snake came from. The classroom is far away from possible snake habitats." *dailymail.co.uk*, 19 Jan 2023.



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